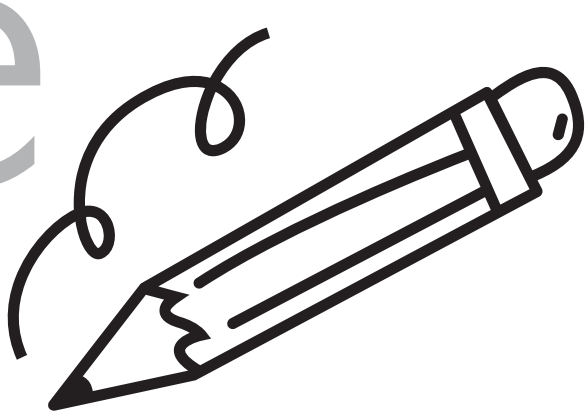
"FULL" VERSION

The Writing Teacher's Strategy Guide



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by Steve Peha

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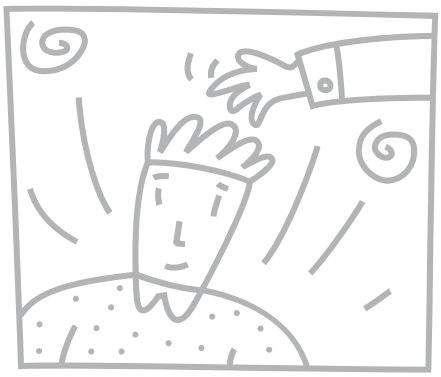

1 I Don't Know What to Write About

It's the worst feeling in the world. You know you're supposed to be writing; your teacher just told you to get started. But where do you start?

Finding a good topic is one of the hardest parts of learning to write. And, unfortunately, every writer runs into it right at the beginning. Even if you do come up with a good topic for today, what about tomorrow? And the next day? And the next? Are you going to have to struggle like this every time a teacher asks you to write?

Probably.

No matter how many times you've come up with good topics before, you end up with the very same problem the next time you start a piece. And that's why you need strategies that will always give you many good topics to choose from.

One approach that seems to work well for many writers is the Topic T-Chart strategy. The idea is to make two lists at the same time based on opposites. Here are some examples that will help you find something good to write about:

- **Like-Hate.** Things you like and things you hate.
- **Typical-Unusual.** Typical experiences that happen almost every day and unusual experiences that have happened only once or twice in your entire life.
- **Fun-Have To.** Things you do for fun and things you do because you have to.
- **Regret-Proud Of.** Things you regret and things you are proud of.

You can use these lists over and over. (You can even use them in different classes and in different grades!) Try a couple of the ones suggested here or make up your own. In just a few minutes, you'll have enough topics to last a whole year!

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Like-Hate T-Chart

Good writing comes from strong feelings. And strong feelings come from things we like and things we hate. Make a list of the things you really like and the things you really hate (no people on the "Hate List," please!). If you're honest about it, each topic will be something you have a lot to write about.

LIKE	HATE
Things I Really Like a Lot	Things I Really Can't Stand
(Think about your absolute favorites!)	(No people, please!)

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Typical-Unusual T-Chart

Good writing comes from life experience. And the life experiences we know best are the typical things we do every day and the unusual things that happen to us maybe only once or twice in our entire lives. Either way, these kinds of topics are perfect things to write about.

TYPICAL Regular, Everyday Experiences	UNUSUAL Out-of-the-Ordinary Experiences
(Sometimes the little things in life make the best topics for writing.)	(Think of the highs and lows in your life, the times that aren't like all the others.)

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Examples

Like	Hate
Pizza	All vegetables
The Internet	Homework
Ice cream	Science
Music	Spelling tests
Reading	Getting dressed up
My cat	Cleaning my room
Harry Potter	Rainy days
Soccer	Being bored
Shopping	Bowling
Candy	Golf on TV

Typical	Unusual
Waking up	Bike accident
School	Chicken pox
Dinner	Broke my arm
Practice trumpet	Disneyland
Soccer	Getting my 1st bike
Watching TV	Met Mia Hamm
Visiting grandma	Saw Wynton Marsalis
Feeding my cat	Getting presents
	Getting grounded

Fun	Have To
Out to dinner	Get my hair cut
Movies	Getting up early
Holidays	Wash the dishes
Staying up late	Babysit brother
Rollerblading	Get good grades
Halloween	Practice scales
Talk on phone	
Soccer camp	
Singing	

Regret	Proud Of
Not getting Wynton Marsalis's autograph	My soccer Trophy
Missing my soccer tournament cuz I got grounded	In 4th grade when I got all A's
Being mean to my brother sometimes	When I saved my cat from that big dog.
	I'm good at math

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T-Chart Tips

Save your T-charts. Each topic T-chart you create will have many different topics on it. Most people come up with 10-20 each time they do it. If you save your charts, you'll always have lists of ideas to go back to when it's time to write. By making and saving several different lists, you can generate enough topics to last an entire school year. This is great for you, but it's even better for your teacher. If there's one thing teachers dread it's hearing their students complain about not having anything to write about.

Pick only the best topics. Not every topic that shows up on a topic T-chart is worth writing about. Don't forget the three rules of topic picking: **(1)** Pick topics you know a lot about. You can't write well about something if you don't know much about it. **(2)** Pick topics you have strong feelings about. If you don't care about the topic, your audience won't care about it either. And, **(3)** Pick topics that are appropriate for your audience. Know who you're writing for and how to write to them in a way that will make them feel comfortable and respected. Every topic you pick to write about, whether it's on a topic T-chart or not, must meet all three of these criteria.

Putting something on both sides of the same chart. Is it possible to really like and really hate something at the same time? Yes, it is! For example, I really like teaching. It's incredibly rewarding for me to help kids learn. But sometimes, when the kids are acting up and I can't control the class, I feel like teaching is the worst possible thing I could be doing. Often, when something is really important to us, we have many different and even conflicting feelings about it. That's just human nature. It's also the nature of a great topic. If you feel like you want to put the same thing on both sides of a topic T-chart, do it. And then start writing about it. Topics that show up on both sides of the same chart are often the best topics we come up with.

Be specific if you can. You may write down that you like "movies." That's a great topic. But you'll probably get a better piece out of it if you think more specifically. For example, if you thought about which kinds of movies you liked best and wrote down "action movies," your writing would probably be more detailed and more focused. You can also use this approach to get more topics out of a single choice. If you put down "sports," for example, you might be able to come up with several different sports and write a different piece about each one.

Writing about the same topic more than once. Can you write about the same topic more than once? Of course you can. Professional writers do it all the time. However, they don't just write the same piece over and over because their readers would get bored and frustrated if they had to read the same thing all the time. If you pick the same topic more than once, you need to write a different piece about it each time. Also, because you're still learning to write, it's better for you to try many different topics instead of picking the same ones all the time. However, all writers have their specialties, the topics they like writing about best, and you should have yours, too.

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What's a Good Idea?

Some ideas are better than others. Just because it's on a list you made doesn't mean it's necessarily great thing to write about. Sometimes you may want to consider things a bit more carefully before you start writing. To help you with that, I've come up with a series of questions you can ask yourself about any topic you choose. How you answer these questions may help you discover that some of your topics are better than others.

Is the topic something you have strong feelings about? How much writers care about their topic is probably the strongest predictor of success with the finished piece. Your feelings about the topic affect your writing in three ways: **(1)** The amount of effort of you put in will be greater if you care about your topic, and this extra effort will probably lead you to produce better work. **(2)** Your voice will be stronger if you care about the topic. Voice is the personal quality in a piece of writing, it's how your personality shapes the piece in ways that make it different from anyone else's. It's also the aspect of your writing that will be most interesting to the majority of your readers. **(3)** You'll have a lot more fun writing a piece if you care about the topic. The work will go faster and be more enjoyable.

Is the topic something you know a lot about? Writing is really two activities wrapped up into one. The first activity involves coming up with the ideas you plan to write about. The second involves writing those ideas down in ways that are interesting and understandable to your readers. The simple truth is that you can't do the second. if you haven't figured out the first. If you don't know a lot about your topic, you have two choices: **(1)** You can do some research and learn more about it. Or **(2)** you can pick something different to work on that you know more about.

Is the topic something you can describe in great detail? Details are the heart of any good piece of writing. Details are also what make your writing different from anyone else's. Without good details, most pieces are boring. Part of knowing a lot about your topic is knowing the little things about it that your readers probably don't know.

Is the topic something your audience will be interested in? Before you can answer this question, you have to know who you're writing for. In school, your audience usually consists of the other students in your class plus the teacher. But often we write for wider audiences, too. In either case, you have to know who your audience is and why they might be interested in the topic you've chosen to write about.

Is the topic something your audience will feel was worth reading? Your readers have to expend time and effort to read your writing. What do you have to say to them about your topic that will keep them reading all the way to the end, and make them feel like they got their money's worth when they get there?

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Do You Have a Good Idea?

FEELINGS What are those feelings? How will you communicate them to your reader? Is there an important detail you want to emphasize so your reader will understand exactly how you feel?

KNOWLEDGE What are the main things you want to cover? What's the most important part of your piece? What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know about your topic?

DETAILS What are some of the important details of your topic? Why are these details important? How do these details help the reader understand your message?

INTEREST Who is your audience? Why will they be interested in your topic? What will interest them most? What does your audience need to know to understand and enjoy your piece?

VALUE What will your audience get from reading your piece? Will your audience learn something new? What will make your audience want to follow your piece all the way to the end?

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Choosing Topics For Research

Way back when I was your age. I had to do many research papers. They were, without exception, awful pieces of writing. I had topics I didn't like or didn't know much about. I didn't know what doing research really meant. (I thought it had something to do with copying things out of encyclopedias and changing the words around.) And I certainly didn't know very much about writing.

My experience with research in school was, I think, typical of many students even today. I did state reports, country reports, animal reports, and famous people reports. I didn't enjoy it, I don't remember the information, and I never again used the skills I acquired. The whole process didn't make a lot of sense to me. And I never felt that I was learning very much.

Now, as an adult, I find myself engaged in research of one kind or another all the time. At the moment, for example, I have two projects going. In one, I am reading several books about the brain and memory so I can help kids retain more of what they study. In the other project, I am learning about building complex interactive web sites. This is more like the kind of research people do for their jobs. In fact, that's why I'm researching these topics, so I can do some new things in my work.

It's interesting for me to note that neither of these projects will require me to write a report. They will both require, however, the creation of something tangible. In one case, new teaching materials, in the other, a web site. Research always has some kind of output, some kind of finished product that the researcher has to be responsible for. But written reports of the kind we do in school are only one way to present our results.

For me, the allure of research revolves around problem solving. As I learn about how research is done in the world, I find this to be a consistent theme. At the root of it all is human curiosity. The need to know creates the problem the act of research seeks to solve. We all need to research the things we're curious about.

When I went to school, research involved the gathering up of facts and the presentation of those facts to the teacher in the form of a written report. Since the facts I gathered were already known, and since neither I nor my teacher had much interest in knowing them, the exercise was meaningless. In the world outside of school, it isn't just the facts that count. Facts are an important part, but not the whole. It is the meaning of the facts that makes the work worthwhile and the learning long lasting. And that only happens when we're solving problems we care about and satisfying our curiosity.

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The Six Principles of Research

A matter of principles. Few people get through their entire lives without doing some research. Even if you manage to avoid it in school, you'll undoubtedly be faced with it in your adult life. So, if you're going to do research in school, you might as well do it the way people do it in the real world. Then, even if you don't like it, you'll still get an introduction in something valuable.

In the real world, research follows a set of six principles. These principles define what research is, how it should be done, and how it is evaluated. Even if you don't learn much doing research in school, you can still learn these principles. Knowing them will serve you well in your adult life outside of school.

Principal #1: The researcher is an expert in the field. We don't ask dentists to research industrial manufacturing methods, we don't ask accountants to study the human genome, and we don't ask graphic artists for their analysis of the economy. Researchers research the things they know best. You may not feel like a true expert in anything. But you do have specific knowledge in many areas: things you like, things you do for fun, things you are interested in, etc. Your home and family situations may also be helpful. When doing research in school, you don't have to be the best expert in the world, you just have to know more about something than your audience does. Regardless of how much you think you may or may not know about things, you must do your work in an area you are familiar with just like real researchers.

Principal #2: The topic is narrow and manageable. Most research has a very narrow focus. There aren't many people writing comprehensive histories of Europe or complete biographies of famous people. The reason for this is the time involved. It takes years, even decades, to write the history of an entire country or the biography of a famous person. And most school kids don't have that kind of time on their hands. Finding an appropriately narrow topic takes a bit of work. It might even take several days. But this is time well spent because if you settle on a topic that is too broad, it is likely that your research will take too long, and that your writing will be of poor quality. To help kids find just the right topic, I tell them to first pick something that matches a personal interest. Then we dig deeper and deeper into that topic to find possible sub-topics. We keep digging until we find something that seems just right. Sometimes the process looks like we're drilling down the levels of an outline: Sports >> Baseball >> Mariners >> Ichiro >> *Japanese players coming to America.* Now here's a topic that might be specific enough for us to work with. We started with "sports" and from there we had to dig down four more levels before we came to something small and focused. This is not uncommon. Starting from a general interest, you may have to dig down five or six levels or more before you find something small enough that you'll be able to research thoroughly and write about well in the short time you'll have to do your work.

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Six Research Principles Cont.

Principle #3: The research answers specific questions. The best research answers very specific questions, sometimes only one. How does a drug inhibit the spread of cancer? How can a company reduce the cost of a product? What were the causes of The Great Depression? How do I create teaching materials that help kids remember what they learn? How do I build a really cool interactive website? Etc. So, after we find an appropriately narrow topic, we try to develop specific research questions that go with it: How many Japanese players are in the Major Leagues? How do they perform relative to other players? Why are Japanese players coming to the Major Leagues now instead of long ago? And so on. We may even come up with questions that lead the research in a slightly different direction: How have the events of September 11th affected the desire of foreign players to come to this country?

Principal #4: The audience is well defined. Research wouldn't be done if someone wasn't interested in it. Knowing who that someone is, and the nature of their interest, helps researchers focus their efforts on the right questions and the best presentation of the answers. In most cases, you'll be doing your research for your peers. But you may come up with different audiences like your family or other people in your community.

Principal #5: Neither author nor audience knows the result of the research. Researchers don't research questions they already know the answers to. Nor do they research things their audience already knows. If you presented something you already knew, no research would be involved. If the information you presented was already known to your audience, there would be no need to present it. This just means that you may need to do a little research on your audience before you get too far into researching your topic. Ask people what they know already about your topic and what they would like to know next.

Principal #6: Presentation matches purpose. To reach their audience most effectively, researchers use a variety of methods to present their results. Sometimes results are written in papers. But often they are presented in some kind of talk with handouts, slides, or other props. Sometimes researchers express their results in working models. More and more, research results are presented in hypertext documents on the web. Researchers do their research for specific purposes. And those purposes often have to do with how they want their information to be used. It is appropriate to present research in written form when we need to reach people who cannot hear us speak or who may need to use our written word as evidence to support their own research. We may reach our audience more effectively, however, if we make an oral presentation. If we intend our research to prove a particular point, or solve a tangible problem, we may want to present a model of some kind. Presenting our research on the Internet is a great way to reach larger audiences and to display our results in an interactive format. How you decide to present your results will influence the information you gather and the way you organize it for your audience.

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When You Can't Choose

Choosing good topics when there is no choice. In an ideal world, you would get to work with any topics you wanted to work with and you could carefully avoid topics you weren't interested in. But school is far from an ideal world. There's all this curriculum, for example, all these subject areas you're supposed to study whether you want to learn about them or not.

When it comes to research in specific subject areas like social studies and science, most kids find themselves at a disadvantage right from the start because they get stuck with unworkable topics. In 7th grade, my social studies teacher told each of us to pick a different country. Because we knew little about our subjects, and because our teacher's requirements were so broad (he required us to cover history, politics, economy, culture, geography, etc.), most of us copied or paraphrased information from encyclopedias. There really wasn't much else we could do given how little we knew about our topics and how much we were supposed to research about them.

So what will you do the next time you're asked to do a research project on something you don't know very much about or don't have much interest in? You'll have to get creative and try to find some meaningful connections between things you know from your own life and things your teachers want you to study.

Topic equations. The best research is always done by researchers who are passionate about their topics. This passion typically comes from a strong personal connection between the researcher and the topic being researched. I like to think of that connection in terms of a mathematical equation: Area of Interest + Area of Study = Possible Research Topic.

The first thing to do is make lists of things in which you have an interest. The lists I use most often with students are: "Things I Like", "Things I Do For Fun", "Things I Care About", and "Things I'm Interested In". You can make up your own lists if you like, but these work well for me.

Once you have your lists, the trick is to find connections between certain items and the subject area you are studying. For example, if one of the things I like is the TV show Star Trek and we're studying 20th Century U.S. History, then doing research on the space program might be perfect for me. If we're studying ancient Rome, however, I might not be able to make such an easy connection with that topic, so I'll have to think about in a different way or pick another item on my list and try to make a different connection.

Picking research topics in traditional school subject areas using the topic equation approach is not easy. It takes some time, some thought, some creativity, and even a little luck. But the effort is worthwhile. When you have a topic that is appropriately defined and connected to something you understand and care about, you have more fun, your learning increases, and you do better work.

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Start with What You Know and Love

LIKE **Things I Like**	FUN **Things I Do For Fun**
CARE **Things I Care About**	INTEREST **Things I'm Interested In**

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Connect it to the Curriculum

INTEREST	SUBJECT	TOPICS
(Things from your list)	(What you are studying)	(Possible areas for research)

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Example

LIKE
Things I Like

Money
Rap music
Clothes
Pizza
Vide games
Movies

FUN
Things I Do For Fun

Play baseball
Take trips
Go to the mall
Hang out with friends
Surf the internet
Talk on the phone

CARE
Things I Care About

My family
My pets
My friends
Violence in my community
People being treated fairly

INTEREST
Things I'm Interested In

Getting a part-time job
Computers
Cars
Going to college

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Example

INTEREST	SUBJECT	TOPICS
(Things from your list)	(What you are studying)	(Possible areas for research)
Baseball	The Civil War	Sports during the period; Baseball as a popular pastime; Etc.
Money	The Civil War	Standard of living; Purchasing power of the average family; Types of coin and paper money; Etc.
Part-Time Job	The Civil War	Work opportunities for young people; Wages and availability of work; Slavery as an impact on employment in undeclared border states; etc.
Family	The Civil War	Family structure and relationships; North-South cultural norms; Roles and expectations; Etc.
Rap Music	The Civil War	Popular music of the period; Politically and socially critical songs and poems; Etc.
Community Violence	The Civil War	Relative safety of urban areas; Crime rates; Police work; Etc.

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2

It's Just a Matter of Opinion

Isn't it frustrating? You're trying to explain something important and people don't understand you. Or you're trying to convince someone of something but they're not going along.

The same thing can happen when you write. But it's worse because you can't be there to clear up any of your reader's confusion. The only thing you can do is make sure that your argument makes sense.

When you've got an important opinion to express, the best way to express it is with the What-Why-How strategy:

- **WHAT do you think?** This is your opinion. Sometimes a single sentence will be all you need. You can also think of it as your main idea if you're writing an essay. Or, if you're working on a research paper, this would be your thesis.
- **WHY do you think it?** Opinions don't just pop up out of nowhere for no reason at all. If you've got an opinion, you've got a reason for it, and often more than one. Can't think of a reason? Maybe your opinion isn't really what you think. (But then, that's just *my* opinion!)
- **HOW do you know?** As the saying goes: "Everyone's entitled to their opinion." But are you really? Where's your proof? What examples or evidence can you come up with to make your point? For every reason you should have at least one example or other kind of proof.

The key to a successful argument is great support. You've got to be able to back up everything you say with good reasons and solid evidence. You can use the What-Why-How strategy to support almost any opinion you have. It's great for expository and persuasive writing. And it even works well when you have to answer essay questions.

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A What-Why-How Chart

WHAT What do you think?	WHY Why do you think it?	HOW How do you know?
(This is your opinion)	(These are your reasons)	(This is your evidence or examples)

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Example

Prompt: Some kids get allowance, some don't. Some get a little, some get a lot. What do you think about allowance? Explain how you feel and try to persuade someone that you're right.

WHAT	WHY	HOW
Allowance works out better when parents think carefully about how much their kids should get, what they get it for, and what they can spend it on.	Some kids have so much money that it really isn't good for them.	A kid in my class gets $50 a week and he's always bragging about how much money he has.
	Some kids get money just for doing normal stuff or for not getting in trouble.	Our neighbors give their kids money just to stop being bad. But it doesn't make them any nicer.
	Sometimes parents take away their kid's allowance and the kid doesn't think it's fair.	Mom took away my allowance once because I didn't clean my room but I just forgot to do it.
	Allowance is a good way for kids to learn about money.	I save some of my allowance every week so I can buy something really special.

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Paragraphs with What-Why-How

Instant paragraphs. In addition to helping you organize your ideas, the What-Why-How strategy can also help with paragraphing. Each row of the chart can become a single paragraph.

WHAT	WHY	HOW
I think dogs make better pets than cats for several reasons.	You can train them to do all kinds of cool things. Cats are almost impossible to train.	My dog can sit and fetch a ball or a stick, and he can even catch a frisbee in the air when I throw it.
	(Another reason...)	(More examples...)

Here's what a paragraph might look like if it was based on the first row of this What-Why-How chart. You build your paragraph by moving from left to right across a single row. Start with the "What," then move to the "Why," and finally, use the "How." You don't have to copy the words exactly. In fact, it's usually better if you change things just a bit:

I think dogs make better pets than cats. First of all, you can train dogs to do things that cat's can't. I have trained my dog to sit when I tell him and he does it every time. He can also fetch a stick or a ball, and he can even catch a frisbee in his mouth if I throw it to him. I've never heard of a cat that could do anything like this. In fact, I've heard people say that cats are almost impossible to train.

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Writing in Reading with W-W-H

Using What-Why-How to support predictions and inferences. The What-Why-How strategy comes in handy when we want to express an opinion about something we've read. In this example, I'll make an inference about characters in the opening paragraph of a story and I'll use the What-Why-How strategy to write it up.

> Eddie had always been able to fly, but it wasn't until his fifth birthday party that he realized that it would turn out to be a bit of a social problem. Until that embarrassing day on the Johnson's lawn, Eddie's parents had treated his airborne peculiarity as something of a childish whim. "Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know...," said his mother. For the young Eddie, flying was just another discovery about his developing body, like learning that he could reach out his arm and ring the bell on his cradle railing, or finding that he loved the taste of peas. The first time his parents came into the nursery and found Eddie hovering a foot or two off the floor it came as a bit of a shock. But, after all, parents are forever discovering special little things about their children. Eddie's mother thought that perhaps they should take their son to see a specialist, but his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."
>
> —from *Eddie Takes Off* by Ben Hippen

WHAT	WHY	HOW
(Inference)	(Reasons)	(Examples from the Text)
Eddie's parents seem a little strange. They don't react to their son's unusual ability the way I think normal parents would act.	They speak in clichés. They sound like people on a cartoon or in a sitcom. They don't seem very smart or responsible.	"Boy's gotta stretch out, learn what he can do," said his father. "I just worry that he'll hurt himself, you know, bump into the ceiling or get his eye poked out by a bird, I don't know...," said his mother. and ... his father vetoed the idea. "It's not like anything's wrong with him, and I don't want him getting a complex about it."

In this example, my inference goes in the "What" column. My reasons for the inference go in the "Why" column. In the "How" column, I put the actual words from the story on which my inference was based. This is the tangible evidence that supports my opinion. Predictions work in a similar way: the prediction goes in the "What" column, your reasons for the prediction go in the "Why" column, and the words from the story on which your prediction was based go in the "How" column.

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Using W-W-H in Social Studies

Using What-Why-How to support a thesis statement or to answer an essay question. In social studies, we're often asked to answer questions and to provide supporting evidence, we also have to come up with thesis statements for essays and reports. The What-Why-How strategy is the perfect tool to use in situations like these.

Here's a typical essay test question or a potential report topic: "Was Abraham Lincoln really as honest as his nickname suggests?"

WHAT	WHY	HOW
(Answer or Thesis)	(Reasons)	(Evidence and Bibliographic Citations)
Lincoln was honest about many things in his life but he was not always honest about the difficult subjects of slavery and race relations in America, especially while he was running for president. Like many politicians, Lincoln was good at telling people what they wanted to hear.	While campaigning for the presidency, he told northern voters he favored racial equality. But while campaigning in the South he told voters there that he supported the idea of whites being superior to blacks.	"Let us discard all quibbling about this man and the other man, this race and that race and the other race being inferior, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position." —Campaign speech made in Chicago, IL, July 10, 1858 "...while they do remain together [blacks and whites] there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race." —Campaign speech made in Charleston, SC, Sept. 18, 1858

The answer or thesis goes in the "What" column. The reasons go in the "Why" column. And the "How" column is used for evidence which in this case consists of two excerpts from campaign speeches Lincoln made in the summer and early fall of 1858, speeches that contain conflicting statements about racial equality. Put it all together and you've got a successful argument that is easy to understand and strongly supported by tangible evidence.

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What-Why-How Strategy Tips

The "How" column is the hardest. We all have opinions, and most of the time we have a good sense of where they come from, a sense of the reasons why we think the things we do. But coming up with specific evidence can be hard. The trick is knowing where to look. If you're trying to support an opinion about your own life, look for specific things that you've experienced. If you say that asparagus is gross because it has a bad taste, back it up with a description of a time when you actually tasted it. If you're making a comment about a character in a book, look for evidence directly in the text. For a social studies report, you'll find what you need in original historical documents, articles, books, and other research sources. In science, look at data and observations from your experiments.

The "How" column is the most important. If you look at the What-Why-How examples, you'll notice that the "How" column always has the most information in it. This is no accident. "How" column information, the tangible evidence upon which all your assertions are based, is by far the most important information you can have. Why? That's simple. Even if you didn't have the "What" or the "Why," many people could figure that out by themselves just by studying the evidence in the "How." Information in the "How" column is also the most convincing. After all, it is only by evidence that we can answer the question, "How do I know for sure?" People may not understand your opinion at all, especially if it is quite different from their own. Knowing your reasons might help a little, but few people are convinced by reasons alone. What most people really want is proof. And for readers, just as it is for judges and jurors, proof requires evidence.

The more unusual your position, the more evidence you need. Many students want to know how much support they need for a given argument. "How many reasons and examples do I have to have, Mr. Peha?" they often ask. In truth, there is no specific number that will always be enough. The amount of support you need varies depending on how likely your audience is to believe you. For example, if I say to you that the sky is blue, you don't need to know my reasons and you certainly don't need much evidence. But if I say that the moon is made of green cheese, well, that's a horse of a completely different color. In order to convince you, I'd have to have data from scientific studies, detailed photographs, and tasty samples from the surface. Even then you'd probably still be suspicious. In terms of school writing, if I want to write a report that says that Abraham Lincoln was one of our greatest presidents, that's pretty easy to do. But if I want to say that he was one of the worst, I'm going to need good reasons and many solid examples.

What-Why-How… How-How-How. It is fair for people to question the truth of your evidence. (It's annoying, but it's fair.) You'll put something great in the "How" column and someone will say in a whiney voice, "OK, but how do you know *that?*" And you'll have to come up with a piece of evidence for your evidence. This can go on for quite a while. In cases like this, you'll need to build in some extra "How" columns to the right of your chart. You'll probably need a second piece of paper, too (or take a look on the next page).

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What-Why-How… How-How-How

WHAT	WHY	HOW	HOW	HOW	HOW
(Opinion, Answer, Thesis)	(Reasons)	(Evidence or Examples)	(More Evidence)	(Even More Evidence)	(One Final Bit of Evidence)

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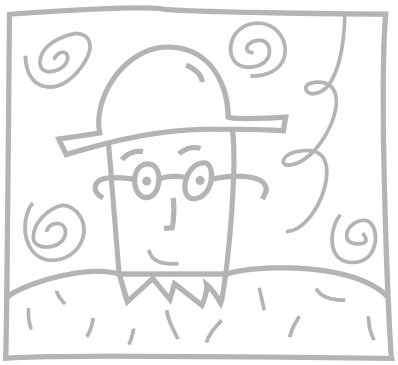

3

It's All in the Details

It was always the same thing. Every time I turned in a piece of writing to my teachers, they would give me the same comment: "Great ideas, but you need more support." After a while, I figured out that this meant I didn't have enough details in my writing. But I still didn't know what to do.

My problem was that I didn't know much about details. Specifically, there were three important pieces of information that I never understood:

- **What's a detail?** A detail is the answer to a question a reader might have. Your audience may understand your ideas but want to know more about them. Readers are very curious; they almost always have questions they want you to answer. If you tell them something interesting, they want to know a lot about it.
- **Why do we need details?** If you don't give your readers the information they want, they get frustrated. It's like hearing the first part of a joke and not getting to hear the punch line. Or watching a movie and not getting to see the ending.
- **How do I put details in my writing?** The best way to add details to your writing is with the Idea-Details strategy (look at the next few pages). Just pick the sentence from your piece that needs more support, write it down on the left side of an Idea-Details chart, and then list your details on the right side. When you finish the chart, put the details back into your piece.

Details are an extremely important part of your writing. Without good details most writing isn't worth reading. Why? Well, without details it's hard for a reader to know exactly what a writer is trying to say. The writer's head is full of things the reader can't possibly know about. The question, of course, is how to get those things into the head of the reader. And the answer is all in the details.

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The Idea-Details Strategy

Give it a try. Take a single sentence from your piece — a single idea — and write it on the "Ideas" side of the chart. Then, make a list on the "Details" side of every detail you can think of that goes with it. Think about the questions your audience would ask and try to answer them.

How many details should you have? That's impossible to say. In general, having five to ten details for an idea will be plenty. The more important and unusual your idea, the more details you will need. Think about what your audience needs to know and make sure you include it.

IDEA	DETAILS
A sentence that needs more support	What your audience needs to know
(Pick something important from your piece)	(Think of the questions people would ask)

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Example

IDEA	DETAILS
I had a huge car accident one morning when I was driving to school.	I was stopped in traffic on the freeway when a truck came up behind me. I heard his engine roar and I knew he was going too fast. He didn't notice I was stopped so he didn't slow down until it was too late. He slammed on his brakes and veered to the right but he still hit me. His truck crunched most of the right side of my car. Glass and metal went flying everywhere. I was scared at first because I thought I was going to get hurt. But afterwards, I was relieved. No one was hurt and I was still able to drive my car away. But it needed over $5000 of repair work.

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A Neat Trick with Idea-Details

Infinite details. You can use the Idea-Details strategy "on itself" to get even more details. Just take one of your details and turn it into an idea on a new Idea-Details chart. In this example, I'm taking one of the details from my car accident story (the part about the $5000 repair bill) and putting it on the "Idea" side. Then I'll add more details on the "Details" side:

IDEA	DETAILS
My car needed $5000 of repair work.	The back end on the right side of my car was completely flattened. I couldn't open the trunk or the right rear passenger side door. When I drove home from the accident, the car wobbled a lot. The rear axle and tires had been moved over a few inches to the right so they didn't match the ones in the front. I took the car to my mechanic and he recommended a guy who does a lot of body work on badly damaged cars. He had the car for over a week and when it was done it looked like it was brand new. He charged $5000 dollars for the repair but my insurance paid for it.

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Tips on Using Idea-Details

Anything goes. Often, kids draw up their Idea-Details chart, put down their idea on the left side, and then just sit there. They think they can't come up with any details. Or they worry too much about how to write them down. Remember, this is just pre-writing. It doesn't really matter how good your details are or how well you write them up. You don't even have to use complete sentences. Just jot down anything that comes to mind that is related to your idea. Put down as many things as you can as quickly as you can even if you don't think you'll use them all.

Let your audience come up with your details. Do you remember that story where Tom Sawyer has to whitewash the picket fence and he doesn't want to do it? He gets his friends to do it for him by making them think it's some kind of fun game. Well, you can pull the same trick on your audience and get them to write your details for you. Just go up in front of your class to share. Tell everybody you're working on an Idea-Details chart and you want help. Read your idea and then get your audience to ask you questions about it. Every time they ask a question, answer it by writing something on the details side (but only if they ask good questions; if they ask dumb ones, ignore them). This always works because a detail is the answer to a question a reader might have.

If your teacher wants more details. When I was in school, I dreaded the moment when my teachers would ask me to put in more details. Details, details, details! It was all they ever seemed to want. It wasn't until I started teaching as an adult that I realized why this was: details are the most important part of a piece of writing. As some really smart person once said, "It's all in the details." So, the next time your teacher asks you to put more details in a piece, don't freak out like I did, try this instead: Ask your teacher what he or she would like to know more about. Write that on the "Idea" side of an Idea-Details chart. Then ask your teacher what he or she would like to know about that idea. Answer the questions on the "Details" side.

How many details do you need? Kids always want to know how many details they need. Well, the truth is, you need as many as you need. Sound weird? I suppose it does, but it's true. You need to include enough details so that your audience gets all its important questions answered — and no more. How many questions will they have? Who knows? In general, however, I have found that most ideas can be explained well with five to ten supporting details.

Types of details. No one ever believes me when I say this but there are millions of details out there just waiting to be used. I try to think of specific types of details when I write. For example, when I'm writing a story about something that happened to me, I know that I can always find details in what I'm doing, how I'm feeling, what I'm thinking, where I am, and so on. Whenever I describe something, I can think of it's size, shape, color, position, and many other attributes. And then there's always the traditional who, what, when, where, why, and how. Of these, it has been my experience that "why" and "how" questions are the best source of high quality details.

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4

A Game of Show and Tell

Your probably remember this from kindergarten. You brought in something from home, stood up in front of your class, showed them what you brought, and told a few things about it. That was "show and tell." But what if you forgot to bring something from home and you still had to get up and tell people about it? You'd have to "show" them with your words by describing it.

In writing, we often say that "showing" is better than just "telling." Here are a few reasons why:

- **Showing is more specific than telling.** You could tell about the weather by writing, "The weather was really bad." But it might be better if you "showed" instead: "A harsh wind whipped through the trees. Dark clouds poured down buckets of rain that overran the gutters and spilled onto the sidewalks."
- **Showing helps readers make pictures in their minds.** As the writer, you know what you "see" in your mind as you write. But all your readers have is your words. If you don't "show" them what you're talking about, they won't get the same pictures in their mind that you have in yours.
- **Showing is more interesting than telling.** You could write something like "My dog is cool." Or, you could describe all the things that make your dog so cool and let the readers figure out how cool your dog is all by themselves. This makes readers more interested in your writing because they want to work harder to figure things out.

Showing is one of the most sophisticated techniques a writer can use. It makes your writing richer and more descriptive. It also helps you discover new ways to say things. Showing is the key to rich and satisfying descriptive writing that sounds like the writing you read in the very best books.

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The Tell-Show Strategy

Give it a try. Take any simple sentence from your current piece that mentions something you can describe and write it down on the "Tell" side of the chart. Then, make a picture of that sentence in your mind and write down all the things you see in that picture on the "Show" side.

When I do this, it feels like I'm creating a "mini-story" about a particular thing in my piece. I try to think of all the things I "see" in my mental picture as different characters in a scene. And then I try to bring those characters to life with "showing."

TELL Just say it very simply	SHOW Describe it in detail
(The less you write, the better)	(Make a picture in the reader's mind)

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Example

TELL	SHOW
My basketball game had a strange and exciting ending.	It all came down to the final few seconds. We were behind by one point, 57-56. Our coach had just called time out to set up a play. We were going to go for one shot. My friend Robert was supposed to take it. (He's our best outside shooter.) But something went wrong. I was throwing the ball in but when I looked for Robert, I saw that he had been blocked out by two players on the other team. For a split second I froze, not knowing what to do. Then I realized that if I didn't throw it in quickly, the ref would blow his whistle and the other team would take possession. So I just chucked it as hard as I could toward the basket. Close to the hoop, everyone's arms reached up for the ball. No one could get hold of it as it bounced from player to player. Then, a miracle happened: the ball hit one of their players in the head and bounced right in the hoop as the buzzer went off.

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Another Way to Tell and Show

Making it easier. Sometimes it's hard for me to write the "showing" part because I can't actually "see" it myself. When this happens, I make a list of everything I want to show before I actually write out the sentences. What I do is think about the "tell" part, close my eyes, make a picture of what I see, and then make a list on the "show" side. I use this list to write it all up.

TELL	VISUALIZE & LIST
The lake looked really nice that morning.	• Water smooth and clear • Mist rising up • Fish jumping • Sun coming up • Our boat • A group of ducks • It was cold

SHOW

The water was as smooth as glass and clear enough that we could see almost all the way to the bottom. Thin wisps of mist rose up all around us as our boat glided slowly along. Occasionally, a fish would jump but we'd never actually see it. We'd turn our heads at the sound of the splash just in time to see the circles of little waves expanding outward where the fish had come down. Closer to shore, a group of ducks cut a v-shape in the quiet water as they swam along. It was cold but the sun was coming up and I knew that in a few minutes it would start to get warm.

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Tips on Using Tell-Show

"Showing" by any other name would work as well. Your teachers will often ask you to describe something, or to write descriptively, or to do a piece of descriptive writing. All of these things are the same as "showing" and they're all good things to do.

Tell-Show is similar to Idea-Details but not exactly the same. The difference between Idea-Details and Tell-Show is subtle but important. In both strategies, you list an idea on the left side and some details on the right. But in Tell-Show we're only looking for certain kinds of details: the kind that help the reader make a mental picture of your idea. These are mostly visual details., things you could really see if you were there.

"Showing" has a different "sound" and a different "feeling" when you read it. The best way to learn about "showing" is to look for it in the books you read. Or, rather, to listen for it. Passages of rich descriptive "showing" detail always sound a little different than the rest of the writing. To me, the sound is smoother, more flowing, more musical. In addition, I often find that sentences and paragraphs get longer when an author is "showing." I think this gives it a special feeling, too. Try to pay attention to these changes in your own writing and in the writing you read. Look for "showing" and when you find it, study it.

Save the "Showing" for what's most important. "Showing" catches a reader's attention. Think about it: you're talking about one little thing in a story but you're describing it with sentence after sentence. It's as if you're making your reader focus on one thing for a longer time than they would normally. This is great but you can't overdo it. Save the "showing" for the most important parts of your piece: the most important people, places, events, objects, feelings, etc.

"Showing" slows down the pace. Because you're spending so much time describing one thing in your piece, "showing" makes your readers feel like they're slowing down. This is great if you slow them down to show them something important. But you can't do it all the time. Otherwise, your piece gets too slow and it becomes tedious to read it.

"Showing" often requires specific language and special techniques. When you "show," you're using more words to talk about something than you normally need. To accomplish this, writers make their language more specific. They also use some special writing techniques. You could tell you readers that "It was hot." Or you could show them with something like this: "The scorching sun was as hot as a flame crackling in a fireplace." The adjective "scorching" is very specific. This isn't any old sunny day we're talking about here. And the words "as hot as" introduce a technique called a *simile* where the writer compares one thing to another to increase the reader's understanding.

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5 A Sequence of Events

You do this all the time. You recount something that happened to you. You tell a friend about a movie. Or maybe in school you have to retell part of a story you read. Sometimes you even have to write down the steps you used to solve a problem in math (I know, it's a drag). All of these things are the same in one important way because they all involve describing a sequence of events.

When you describe something as a sequence of events, you can use the same basic structure every time. That structure has three parts:

- **Transitions.** These are short phrases like "Then" or "After a while" or "In the beginning" that help to introduce each new action in the sequence. You don't have to have a transition for each action, but they can be very helpful at making your sequence flow smoothly.
- **Actions.** These are the actual events (the things that happened) listed in the order in which they occurred.
- **Details.** This is additional information about each action. For each action, your audience will probably have two or three important questions you need to answer. These answers are your details.

The Transition-Action-Details strategy is very useful. Opportunities to describe a sequence of events come up all the time in school: in narrative fiction and non-fiction writing, in plot summaries for reading, in the steps of solving a math problem, in social studies when you recount an historical event, in science when you study chemical processes, and so on.

When filling out the Transition-Action-Details chart, start in the "Action" column first. Fill in the first box with the first thing that happens. Then, go to the last "Action" box and write the end. Now, fill in everything in between. When you finish the "Action" column, add a couple of details for each action. Finally, come up with simple phrases in the "Transition" column that introduce each action.

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Transition-Action-Details

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
(Introduce the action)	(Describe what happened)	(Answer audience questions)

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Example

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
Last summer,	I went on vacation with my family to the ocean.	• We go almost every year. • It's fun because there's a lot to do. • I get to do a lot of exploring with my dog.
On the third day,	I was walking with my dog along a cliff overlooking the beach below.	• We were about 75 feet up from the beach. • We were on a path with trees and brush and big piles of rocks by the edge.
As we got up to the highest point on the cliff,	We saw a small animal scurry under some rocks.	• It startled me at first but then I realized that it was probably more afraid of us than we were of it. • I just kept on walking.
All of a sudden,	My dog ran after the animal and jumped over the rocks to try to get it.	• He likes to chase things. • I was amazed at how fast he ran. • He got close to the rocks but didn't stop. He just went right over.
[No Transition]	I ran after him, looked over the edge of the cliff, and found him clinging to some brush hanging by his paws.	• I was so scared. • I thought he'd gone over the cliff and had fallen all the way down. • He looked scared, too.
At first I didn't know what to do. Then,	I tried to reach over the rocks to pull him up.	• I grabbed a piece of the branch and pulled him up with it. • I just kept telling him to hold on and not move. • I could tell that he was just as scared as I was.

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Expanding the Moment

A great technique. Sometimes, a part of a story is so good, we want to stretch it out and make it last a little longer. Here I'm using the Transition-Action-Details strategy to make one part of the dog story (the part when the dog runs off the cliff) take up more time. It's as though I'm taking one moment out of the story and expanding it into several smaller moments. This slows down the pace just at the point where I want the audience to pay more attention.

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
When I heard my dog start after the animal,	I immediately stopped and turned around to watch him.	• He doesn't usually just run off like that. • I was surprised and a little scared.
As soon as I saw where he was headed,	I called out to him to get him to stop.	• He didn't seem to notice. He just kept on going. • I had a feeling something bad was going to happen.
For the next few moments,	I froze.	• I wanted to do something but I didn't know what. • It seemed like it was happening in slow motion.
[No Transition]	He started to run up the rocks just as fast as he could.	When he got to the top, I could tell he was trying to stop but he was going so fast that he couldn't.
As I saw him going over the edge,	I screamed his name again and started running after him.	• As I got to the edge of the cliff, I was afraid to look over. • He was caught in a branch. • He was dangling there 75 feet above the rocks and the water. • I was happy to see him and terrified at the same time.

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T-A-D in World History

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
When the Turkish Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I,	Great Britain ended up administering Palestine.	• League of Nations' Mandate System. • League Covenant Article 22.
In 1917, at the urging of Zionist groups in England,	The British issued the Balfour Declaration.	The declaration expressed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."
During the years of the Mandate, 1922-1947,	Many Jews immigrated to Palestine.	• Mostly from Eastern Europe. • Fleeing Nazi persecution in the 1930s.
In 1947,	The UN proposed splitting Palestine into two states.	• One state for Palestinian Arabs, the other for Jews. • Jerusalem would be internationalized. • Resolution 181 of 1947.
In 1948,	Israel declared its independence.	• Israel was attacked by Arab nations. • They won the war and claimed more than 75% of the land in Palestine. • Half the population of Palestinians left or were thrown out.
In 1967, as a result of the Six Day War,	Israel came to occupy the remaining territory of Palestine.	• The West Bank was formerly under Jordanian control. • The Gaza Strip was controlled by Egypt.

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T-A-D in the History of Science

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
In the 1770s,	Joseph Priestley, in England, performed experiments showing that plants release a type of air that allows combustion.	He burned a candle in a closed jar until the flame went out. He put a leaf in the jar and after several days showed that the candle could burn again.
Although Priestley did not know all the implications of his discovery,	His work showed that plants release oxygen into the atmosphere.	Even today, scientists are still investigating the mechanisms by which plants produce oxygen.
Building on Priestley's work,	A Dutch doctor named Jan Ingenhousz proved that sunlight was necessary for photosynthesis and that only the green parts of plants could release oxygen.	• At the same time, Jean Senebier, in Switzerland, discovered that CO_2 is required. • Nicolas-Théodore de Saussure, a Swiss chemist, showed that water is required.
In 1845,	Julius Robert von Mayer, a German physician, proposed that photosynthetic organisms convert light energy into chemical free energy.	This was a final piece of the puzzle that led to the modern understanding of photosynthesis.
By the middle of the nineteenth century,	The key feature of photosynthesis was understood: that plants use light energy to make carbohydrates from CO_2 and water.	Because glucose, a six carbon sugar, is often an intermediate product of photosynthesis, the equation of photosynthesis is frequently written as: $6CO_2 + 12H_2O + \text{Light Energy} \longrightarrow C_6H_{12}O_6 + 6O_2 + 6H_2O$

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T-A-D and a Scientific Process

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
When light enters the eye,	It hits the cornea first.	It passes through the cornea, then the aqueous humor, the lens, and the vitreous humor.
Eventually,	The light reaches the retina, the light-sensing part of the eye.	• The retina has rods and cones. • Rods handle vision in low light. • Cones handle color vision and detail.
When light contacts these two types of cells,	A series of complex chemical reactions occurs.	A chemical called Rhodopsin creates electrical impulses in the optic nerve.
When it is exposed to light,	Rhodopsin decomposes.	Light causes a physical change in part of the chemical.
In an extremely fast reaction, beginning in a few trillionths of a second,	Rhodopsin breaks down and eventually forms Metarhodopsin.	This chemical causes electrical impulses that are transmitted to the brain and interpreted as light.

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T-A-D and Math Problem Solving

Orange Juice Birthday

On a sweltering Saturday in August, Mr. Cal Q. Luss trudged into his local Friendly Mart to get orange juice for his son's birthday party. For last year's party he had purchased three gallons, more than enough, or so he thought, to slake the monster thirsts of his son's 23 classmates. But Eddie Guzzle drank almost an entire gallon by himself, and poor Elaine Dryer fainted from dehydration after Pin the Tail on the Donkey.

As he entered the store, a blast of air-conditioned coolness reminded him of the temperature outside. It was a scorcher: you could fry eggs on the sidewalk and still have heat left over for a side a bacon and a couple of flapjacks. Mr. Luss vowed that this year he wouldn't be calling little Lainie's mom to pick her daughter up at the Emergency Room. Better make it four gallons.

Proceeding quickly to the juice section, Mr. Luss found himself at a loss when he discovered that all of the large carton juice containers were sold out. He would have to purchase 12-ounce cans of juice instead, but he couldn't figure out how many to get. Extremely frustrated, and behind on time, he knocked the entire display of juice cans into his shopping cart and dashed briskly to the checkout. When he got home, he discovered he had purchased 42 cans of juice. Did he get the four gallons that he needed, or will two dozen 9-year olds be fainting in the fierce mid-day summer sun?

TRANSITION	ACTION	DETAILS
First,	I remembered how many ounces there are in a gallon.	1 Gallon = 128 ounces
Next,	I multiplied this by 4 to get the amount of juice he needed to get.	4 x 128 = 4 x 100 = 400 + 4 x 20 = 80 + 4 x 8 = 32 400 + 80 + 32 = 512 ounces
Then,	I figured out how much juice he bought by multiplying the number of cans times 12 ounces.	42 x 12 = 42 x 10 = 420 42 x 2 = 84 420 + 84 = 504 ounces
Finally,	I subtracted the amount he bought from the amount he needed.	512 - 504 = 8 He was 8 ounces short.

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Tips on Transition-Action-Details

Testing out your sequencing. The thing I like best about this strategy is that it lets me test out my story little by little so I can make sure it's right. I start by filling in the first and last "Action" boxes. This way I know for sure how I want my story to start and end. Then I fill in the boxes in the middle. Finally, I read it over from top to bottom to make sure that things are in the right order and that I haven't left anything out. At this point, it's easy to make a change if I have to switch something around, add in something new, or take something out. Once the "Action" column is good, I feel confident that the rest of the story will work out well, too.

Filling in the details. This is just like filling in the details of an Idea-Details chart. You use the same approach, too. Look at your "Action" and then think about the questions your audience would ask you about it. Or, if you like, share your writing with the class or with a partner and see what questions people ask you. The difference between the "Details" column in this strategy and the "Details" column in Idea-Details is that you don't need as many details for things to work out. Try to come up with two to four really good details for each action. That will usually be plenty.

Don't worry about the transitions. If you can't think of any transitions, or if you feel you don't need them, leave those boxes blank. First of all, not every action needs to be introduced with a transition. Second, when you start to draft, you'll probably put some transitions in naturally without thinking about it. There are only two things you have to watch out for: **(1)** Using the same transition over and over — that's boring. And **(2)** Using too many of those traditional "school" transitions like "First of all," "Another reason why...," "In conclusion," "As you can see," and so on. These transitions aren't wrong, they just sound a little strange because they're not the normal transitions most people use when they write authentically. In truth, the best writing uses no transitional phrases at all. Instead, the writer uses logic to move the reader from one action to the next.

The right number of actions. How many actions do you need? That's impossible to say. At a minimum, you would have to have three in order to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. There's nothing stopping you from having a hundred if you want. But most of us can only keep track of seven or so. If you have more than seven or eight actions, your story might begin to feel as though it's a bit long or too complicated. See if you can combine several actions into one. Remember, you can always expand any action into several actions at a later time (and on another chart) by using the "expand the moment" technique.

Working with the chart. If you have more actions in your story than there are rows on the chart, just get another piece of paper and continue. If there are more rows on the chart than you have actions in your story, just leave the ones you don't use blank. If you'd like to create extra rows on the same page, just draw a horizontal line across the chart and split any single row into two. Use the chart in whatever way makes sense to you. There's no one right way to do it. Better yet, draw your own Transition-Action-Details chart on your own paper.

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6

The Picture Worth a Thousand Words

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. But who are *they* anyway? And why do they exaggerate so much? Can you really get a thousand words out of a single picture?

Probably not. A hundred, two hundred maybe. But not a thousand. Still, a couple hundred words is nothing to sneeze at.

Drawing can really help you write. When you take a few minutes to sketch a quick picture, you give yourself a chance to focus on your topic and that can make your writing richer and more detailed.

Drawing for writing is a little different than normal drawing because it has a different purpose. To achieve that purpose, we use a three-step process like this:

- **Draw.** Make a quick pencil sketch of your scene. This is a rough sketch: use outlines only, stick people are encouraged. Try to include as many little details as you can. You can't have too many details. Don't forget to include yourself in the picture if it's appropriate.
- **Label.** Create a one- or two-word text label for each item in your drawing. Label everything you can think of, even different parts of things.
- **Caption.** Write a single sentence underneath the picture that tells what is happening. This can be a very simple sentence or something more complicated if you're up for it.

You'll be surprised how much you can get out of this simple activity. As you draw different things, you'll remind yourself about different parts of your story and this will give you more things to write about. You don't even have to know how to draw. You may not think you're any good at creating cool pictures. But everyone can picture their writing.

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Draw-Label-Caption

DRAW

LABEL

CAPTION

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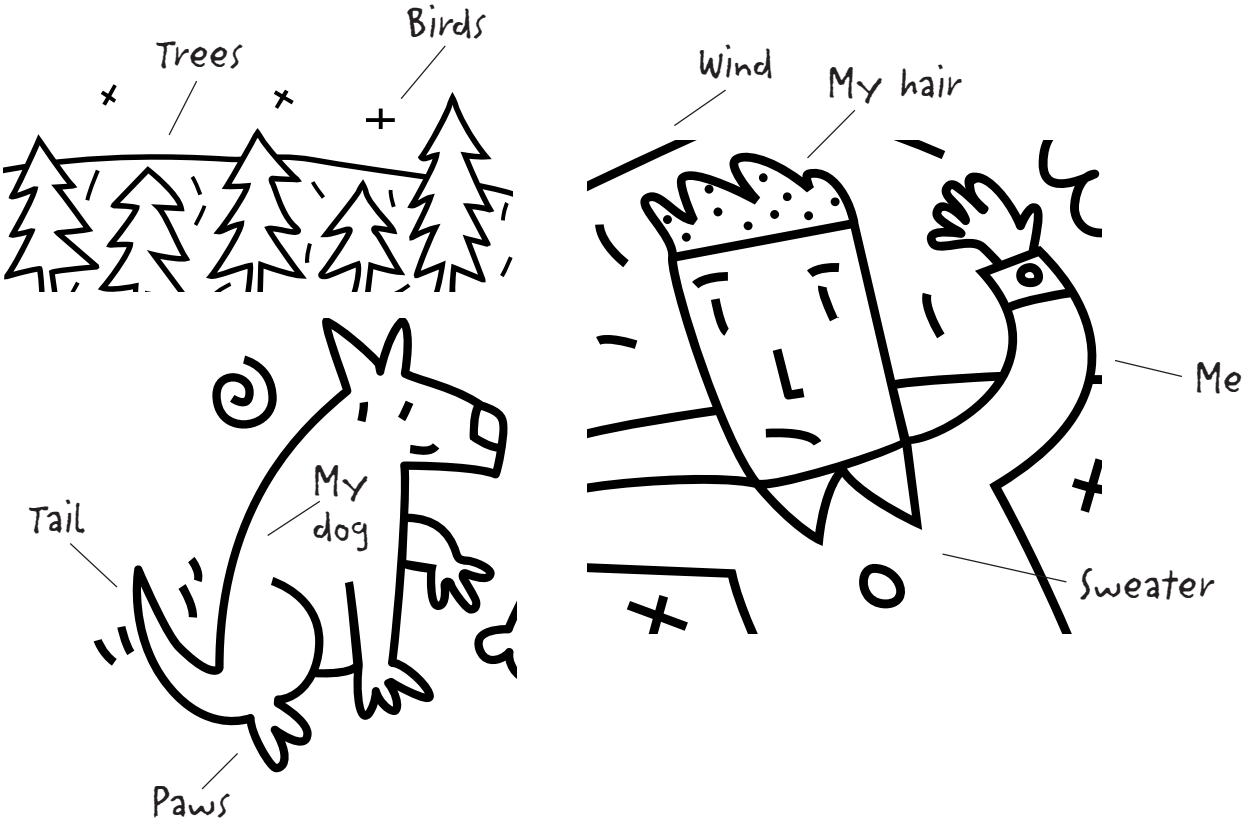
Example



I'm just about to throw the frisbee and my dog is going to go after it.

- This is just a rough sketch, not a finished illustration; I don't need to spend much time on it. I'm really just going to draw outlines and simple figures. When I'm done with my piece, I might redo the picture, in color, for a cover.
- I'm going to try to label everything I can think of; each label can become a detail in my writing.
- In the caption, I'm going to write down what I think is most important about the picture, but I'm going to try to do it in a single sentence. Later, if I want, I can go back and make the caption more interesting. I might get some ideas for my title from the caption.
- Drawing a picture makes me more familiar with the scene and helps me think of things to write about.
- Drawing helps me visualize details which helps me find the words which help my readers create the same picture in their minds that I am creating here.

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What About All Those Words?

From labels to sentences. We thought we were going to get a hundred, maybe two hundred words. But all we got was a few labels and a one-sentence caption. Where do we get the rest? For each label in your picture, you can easily come up with one or more sentences like this:

ME - I'm about to throw the frisbee. This is my favorite game to play with my dog. I love to see him chase it down and catch it in his mouth before it hits the ground.

SWEATER - It's cold out but I've got a thick wool sweater on.

MY HAIR - The wind is blowing my hair all over the place.

WIND - It's unusually windy today. I'm throwing into the wind because I'm afraid that if I throw it the other way, the frisbee will go too far.

TREES - The big trees in the park are swaying from side to side. Some of the leaves are falling off.

BIRDS - There are birds flying above the trees. I wonder how they can fly in wind like this?

MY DOG - My dog is excited and ready to go. He knows that when I get the frisbee out that we're going to play one of his favorite games.

TAIL - He's wagging his tail like crazy. That means he's really happy. He can't wait to tear off after the frisbee.

PAWS - He can't keep his paws still. He's scratching at the dirt and getting ready to run.

(Almost 200 words!)

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Tips on Draw-Label-Caption

Don't be shy about drawing. If you're older than seven or eight, you might think that drawing a picture before you write is kind of silly. It's not. Even if you're not the greatest artist in the world, drawing a picture in preparation for writing can really help. First of all, you'll be much more focused. Second, you'll have better command of the details. And finally, while you're drawing, you'll spend several minutes thinking about what you want to say. You can probably draw something for just about every piece you write. Better yet, make several drawings for each piece. Lay them out in order like a storyboard.

Really get into the labeling. I've already talked about how each label can be turned into a detail in your piece, and how each detail can then be turned into a sentence or two. But actually, you can go farther than that. You can actually label your labels. Here's what I mean: Say you've labeled the water in a scene about swimming at the beach: "water." You could add a label to that label that tells something about the water: "choppy waves." And then you could label that label: "about three feet high." And so on. What you're doing is building up strings of modifiers: adjectives, adverbs, and phrases that make your writing more descriptive and more specific.

Redo a picture for your cover. I think it's cool to put an illustrated cover on your piece when it's finished. Why not take one of your drawings and redo it? You can use color, fill things in, add details, etc. The picture you choose might even suggest a title for your piece.

Explore the fine art of caption writing. If you want to learn a lot about revising sentences, put in some work on your caption. Captions are short and you can revise them quickly and easily. See how much you can cram into a single sentence. See how many different ways you can change the order of the words around and have it still make sense. Add extra describing words and phrases. As you re-work your caption, try to make it more and more interesting, not just longer.

Use dialog and thought bubbles. You can treat your picture as though it was a panel in a comic strip. Use dialog bubbles to show people talking. Use thought bubbles to show people thinking. If you want, you can turn those bubbles into material for your scene. It's always great to start a scene with someone saying something. I call that a "talking" lead. And "thinking" leads are good too: "I'd better not let this get by me, I thought to myself, as the guy on the other team lined up for the penalty kick."

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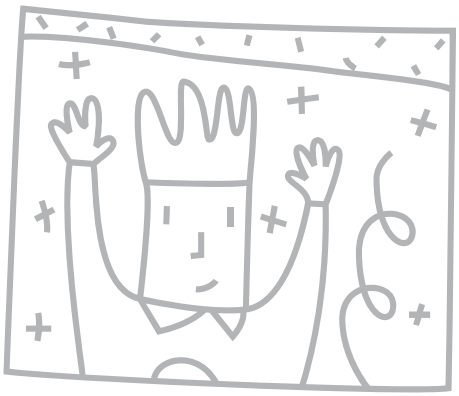

7 The Three Key Ingredients

If you don't tell'em, they'll have to ask. Readers are a pesky lot. It seems like they're always asking questions about what you write, and they don't give up until they're satisfied.

Satisfying your readers isn't easy. They always want to know what's going on, they want to be able to follow the action. They want to enjoy themselves, too; they want to have interesting feelings as they read. Finally, they seem to need some basic information about where and when things happen and what led up to what. And if you don't give them everything they want, they'll have to ask you about it to figure it out. If you're not around to answer their questions, they'll probably just stop reading your piece.

Every time you begin writing about a new scene in a fiction or non-fiction narrative, make sure your readers get three types of information:

- **Action.** There's something important happening in this scene. If there wasn't, you wouldn't be writing about it. Your readers are following the action closely. You need to describe the action simply and completely so people will know what's going on.
- **Feelings.** There are important people in this scene and they have feelings about what is happening. You want your readers to care about your story. The best way to do that is to describe how people feel and why they feel the way they do.
- **Setting.** Readers sometimes get confused if they don't know where and when something is taking place. They also like to know about things that led up to what you're writing about.

Every narrative story you write, be it fiction or non-fiction, is made up of scenes. And in every single scene, your readers need to understand the action, feelings, and setting information in order to enjoy and appreciate your work.

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Action-Feelings-Setting

Give it a try. Pick a scene from your story that you'd like to start writing. If you want, draw a picture first so you have something to focus on.

ACTION Describe what it is happening. A sentence or two about the main action is all you really need. If this story is about you, describe what you are doing.

FEELINGS Describe the feelings of the important people in this scene. Tell what they are feeling and why they feel that way. Don't forget to describe your feelings.

SETTING Tell where and when this is taking place. Also, include a detail or two that tells something interesting about what led up to this situation.

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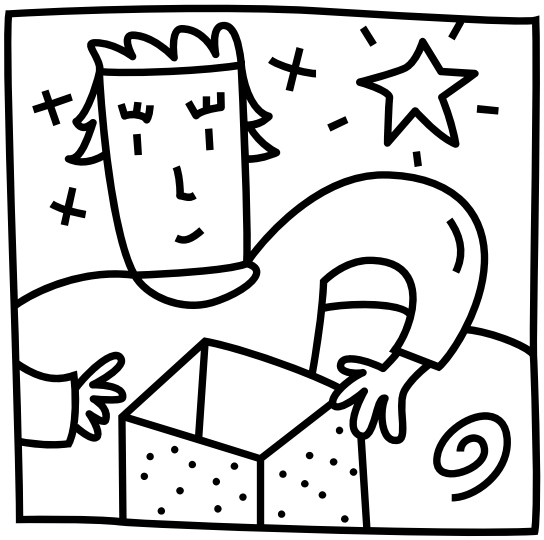
Example



ACTION

I'm opening up my last Christmas present and looking inside the box. I'm hoping it's the Nintendo GameCube that I asked for.

FEELINGS

I'm excited because the box is square and I think it might be the GameCube. But I'm also a little frustrated because I haven't gotten any Nintendo stuff yet and I'm worried that I might not get the one thing I really wanted.

SETTING

I'm in the livingroom sitting on the couch in front of the Christmas tree. It's almost noon. I wanted to get up and start unwrapping presents hours ago. I couldn't wait to see if I would get my Nintendo. I had been asking about it for almost the whole year. It was the only present I really cared about.

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Scene and Variations

Using your pre-writing. Use the material from the Action-Feelings-Setting strategy to create an opening paragraph for your scene. Write it up in any order you like. Change the words around, add new ideas, or leave things out that don't seem important. As long as you've got some action, feelings, and setting information, your seen should be in good shape. Here are three variations:

Action-Feelings-Setting

There I was opening up my last Christmas present, hoping it would be the Nintendo GameCube I'd been dreaming about all year long. I was excited because the box was square and just about the right size. But I was also frustrated because I hadn't gotten any Nintendo stuff yet and this was my very last present. I was sitting on the couch in front of the Christmas tree, struggling with the wrapping paper. I couldn't wait to see what it was. The GameCube was the only present I really cared about. It was almost noon and I had been up since 5AM. I wanted to start unwrapping presents hours ago but my mom said I had to wait until my Gramma got up.

Setting-Action-Feelings

It was noon on Christmas day. I had been awake since 5AM. I couldn't wait to start unwrapping presents but my mom said I had to wait until my Gramma woke up. All year long I had been dreaming about the new Nintendo GameCube. Now I figured I'd finally get it. I was sitting on the couch in front of the tree unwrapping my very last present. I was excited because the box was square and just about the right size. But I was also frustrated because I hadn't gotten any Nintendo stuff yet and this was my very last present.

Feelings-Setting-Action

I was excited because the box was square and just about the right size. But I was also a bit frustrated. I was sitting on the couch in front of the Christmas tree. It was noon and I had been up since 5AM. I wanted to start unwrapping presents hours ago but my mom said I had to wait until my gramma woke up. But now the time had come. I was opening up my very last Christmas present, looking inside the box, and hoping it would be the Nintendo GameCube I had been dreaming about all year long.

All three of these paragraphs work, but I like the third one best. Starting out with feelings — something I like to call a "feelings lead" — is a great way to begin because it really grabs the reader's attention. Everyone can relate to someone else's feelings and hardly anyone can resist finding out why someone feels the way they do. The "feelings lead" is a perfect way to start because it gets your readers interested and makes them want to read more.

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A-F-S in World History

ACTION

Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin pose impatiently for a photograph at the opening of the Yalta conference which has since come to symbolize the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War.

FEELINGS

Roosevelt was weak and tired, his health was failing. He would die in two months. Churchill presented a stubborn and defiant posture but gave in to the reality of Soviet power. Stalin felt strong, energetic, even youthful. His 12-million man army was the largest in Europe by far. He knew he could drive a hard bargain and win.

SETTING

This meeting of the "Big Three" at the former palace of Czar Nicholas on the Crimean shore of the Black Sea took place from February 4-11, 1945. Roosevelt had hoped to deal with Russia through the soon-to-be created United Nations. He knew this was not the place and time to negotiate with Stalin. "I didn't say the result was good," he said to an associate. "I said it was the best I could do."

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Tips on Action-Feelings-Setting

Don't skimp on the feelings. I say this all the time to writers: "Put strong feelings in your writing." In fact, the main reason I came up with the Action-Feelings-Setting strategy was because I wanted to make sure everyone put their feelings down. Why are feelings so important? I don't know exactly but I think it has something to do with how readers relate to writers. If I read your writing I may not be able to fully understand your experiences because my life has been different. But if you say you felt embarrassed or scared or excited about something, I know exactly what you mean because I've had those feelings, too.

There are a couple of things you can do to improve the way you express feelings in your writing: **(1)** Get a thesaurus or go online to a website like www.dictionary.com and learn more words that express emotions. You already know words like "happy" and "sad" and "angry," so look for other synonyms and learn more about what those words mean. **(2)** Give more thought to how you really feel when you describe events from your life. For example, I notice that in some circumstances I actually have two feelings, not just one. In a story I wrote about catching my first fish, I said that when I hooked the fish I felt excited but that I also felt scared because I was afraid I might lose it. This is more common than you think. It's called having "mixed emotions" and it usually happens when something really important or unusual is going on.

Don't forget to tell the "back story." Remember that in the "setting" part of the strategy we try to put in a detail or two that explains how this situation happened or what led up to it. This is different from how we normally think about the setting. Usually, we think of the setting as simply time and place, when the story happened and where. We still need that information but we need a bit more. When you write about things that happened before the story happened, I call this writing about the "back story." The back story is the story behind the story. And knowing a bit about it gives your readers a better understanding of what is going on. The purpose of the setting in a story is not just to tell you where and when it takes place, it is to "set up" the action that is about to come. Nothing sets up a story better than a little information about the back story.

Try to "show" your feelings. Take the information you write for your feelings and put it into the "Tell" side of the Tell-Show strategy. Then, on the "Show" side, think of ways to describe yourself so that your readers will know how you feel without actually having to tell them.

Try to detail your actions. Take the information you write for your action and put it on the "Idea" side of the Idea-Details strategy. Then, on the "Details" side, break the action down into as many parts as you can. Really stretch it out and try to make it last.

Write an Action-Feelings-Setting "mini" story. If you do a good job on each part of this strategy, the information makes a tiny story all by itself. Think about revising, editing, and publishing it with a color picture. Can you tell a complete story in a single paragraph?

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8

The Definition of Writing

Why didn't they just tell me in kindergarten? I went through a lot of school — about 20 years if you count college — and I never really knew what writing was. I knew that it had to do with words and ideas, of course, but I never had a crystal clear understanding of it that would help me write more effectively.

Then I started teaching writing and I realized that the students I was working with didn't really know what writing was either. But now it was *my* responsibility to figure it out and teach it to them. So I thought about it for a while and this is what I came up with: "Writing is the communication of *content* for a *purpose* to an *audience*."

Here's what I mean by that:

- **Content (Main Idea + Key Details).** The content of a piece is what the writer wants to say. There are two parts to the content: the *main idea,* the one most important thing the author wants you to know; and the *key details,* additional information that supports and explains the main idea.
- **Purpose (Think + Do).** The purpose of a piece is why the writer wrote it. Writers want their readers to *think* something after they've finished reading. Sometimes they want their readers to *do* something, too.
- **Audience (People + Questions).** The audience for a piece is who the writer writes to. We always write to people. Sometimes it's a specific person, sometimes it's a group of people. And people always have questions they want you to answer. So, you can think of the audience as the *people* you are writing to and the *questions* they have about your topic.

Every piece of writing can be broken down according to its content, purpose, and audience. If you think about these three things every time you write, your pieces will be more successful and you'll always know that you're really writing.

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Content

Content = Main Idea + Key Details. The *main idea* of your piece is a single sentence that sums everything up and expresses the one most important thing you want your readers to know. It should be something that is important to you and that you think will be important to your readers as well. The *key details* are the vital pieces of information your readers have to have in order to "unlock" or understand your main idea.

MAIN IDEA

What's the one most important thing you want your readers to know? Did you write it in a complete sentence? Is it important to you? Is it important to your readers?

KEY DETAILS

What do your readers need to know to understand your main idea? What significant details must you include in your piece to support your main idea?

1.

2.

3.

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Example

A fish story. I've been working on a piece about growing up with my father. We did a lot of different things together but what I remember best are the times we went fishing. My dad taught me to fish when I was very young, maybe only 5 or 6, I don't really remember. But I do remember that it was one of my favorite things to do as a kid. And it was definitely my favorite thing to do with my dad.

MAIN IDEA

What's the one most important thing you want your readers to know? Did you write it in a complete sentence? Is it important to you? Is it important to your readers?

The times in my life as a kid when I felt closest to my dad were the times when we would go fishing together.

KEY DETAILS

What do your readers need to know to understand your main idea? What significant details must you include in your piece to support your main idea?

1. We would often get up early on Saturday or Sunday mornings and go to Green Lake together. We would take along some maple bars or cinnamon rolls and some hot chocolate. It was just me and him, fishing from the shore, talking and hanging out together for hours at a time.

2. One time my dad talked me into going fishing down at Green Lake by the apartment where he lived. I didn't want to go because I never caught any fish there. He had read in the paper that they had just stocked the lake that morning. But he didn't tell me. Finally, I agreed to go. I caught 8 big trout in less than half an hour. It was a wonderful surprise and I really loved my dad for not telling me about it ahead of time.

3. The times when we were fishing were the times when my dad always seemed happiest. He wasn't sad or worried or frustrated like he was at other times. I think he felt good about himself because he knew he was doing something good for me.

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This Main Idea Thing

Boy, was I confused. I remember my teachers trying to teach me about "main idea." I didn't get it at all. At different times I thought it was any or all of the following: **(1)** The title. **(2)** The main thing that happened in the story. **(3)** The main character. **(4)** The topic. **(5)** Something entirely mysterious that I would never ever understand no matter how hard I tried. So, when I started teaching kids about writing, I knew I needed to clear this up for myself.

The difficulty I had understanding the concept of a main idea was not entirely my fault. Nor was it entirely the fault of my teachers. It's a tricky thing and, in truth, there probably is no single definition that everyone in the world could agree on. So, when I started teaching, I just made up a definition that I thought would help kids write more effectively:

The main idea of a piece of writing is the one most important thing the writer wants the reader to know.

Remember the one about the turtle and the rabbit? The rabbit, who is really fast, has a race with the turtle, who is really slow. The rabbit breaks out to an early lead. He gets so far ahead that he feels like he can take a break. The turtle just keeps pluggin' away, step by tedious step, and eventually he catches up. So, the rabbit sprints ahead again, this time getting so far out in front that he has time to catch the new Star Wars movie at the multiplex. Meanwhile, the turtle, who is not a Star Wars fan, just keeps to his consistent though glacial pace, lumbering along putting one big turtle paw in front of the other. And so it goes.

The story ends, of course, when the rabbit, who shot out of the movie theatre like a lightning bolt when he saw that the turtle had caught up once again, and quickly found himself miles ahead of his competitor, decided he was hungry and stopped in at Frank's Finish Line Diner for a huge plate of chicken fried steak with biscuits and gravy. Now, the rabbit and Frank have been buddies since high school and Frank knows that after a big meal like that his furry little friend likes to stretch out for a cat nap (or is a rabbit nap?) on the couch in the back room. Well, you can imagine what happened: there's the rabbit, his big bunny belly full to burstin' with Frank's savory vittles, sawin' logs on the couch while that pokey old turtle ambles over the finish line and wins.

So what's the one most important thing the writer of this story wants you to know? Don't get in a race with a turtle? Don't see the new Star Wars movie? Don't order the chicken friend steak at Frank's diner? Most people say it's something like, "Slow and steady wins the race." In this case, the main idea isn't actually written in the story. But you can figure it out from the key details, the significant things that *are* in the story that help you understand the writers' message or, as it is sometimes called, the lesson or the moral. You don't have to hide your main idea so cleverly in your own pieces. If you want, you can just tell your readers what it is. But you have to have a main idea so your readers will know *exactly* what your piece is all about.

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Purpose

Purpose = Think + Do. Generically, we might say that the purpose of a piece of writing is "to entertain" or "to inform" or "to explain" or "to describe" or "to persuade." This is often how we talk about purpose in school. It's true that these are the typical purposes for writing, but understanding this may not help you very much with the piece you're working on right now. Specifically, writers write because they want their readers to be thinking about something when they finish reading. And often they want their readers to do something, too.

THINK Why did you write this piece? What specific thought or thoughts do you want your readers thinking about after they have finished reading?

DO Why did you write this piece? What specific action or actions do you want your readers to take after they have finished reading?

Please note: You don't have to have both a "Think" and a "Do." Many pieces have just one or the other. However, I have found that writers who include both often end up with stronger pieces.

Please also note: You may feel that you would like your "Think" or your "Do" to be identical to your main idea. This is fine. But your piece will be stronger if you take the opportunity here to go a step beyond your main idea. For example, why is your main idea important to your reader?

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Example

Fishing for my purpose. I'll be the first to admit that coming up with a specific statement of purpose is not easy. Sometimes I don't figure it out until I'm almost done with my piece. Then I often have to go back and do some serious rewriting. At this point, with my fishing story, I have only a vague idea of why I'm writing this. I think it has something to do with reminding parents about what is most meaningful to their children.

THINK Why did you write this piece? What specific thought or thoughts do you want your readers thinking about after they have finished reading?

More than anything else you do for your children, it's the time you spend with them that they will remember forever and value most.

DO Why did you write this piece? What specific action or actions do you want your readers to take after they have finished reading?

Try to find more time to do things with your kids. If possible, see if you can come up with things you can do on a regular basis so your kids will always know they can count on having this time with you.

Is this any good? I have to admit that it's not always possible to know how well you're doing at this point. Sometimes, when I try to come up with my purpose this way, I feel like what I'm writing sounds kind of corny. That's how this feels now. Naturally, I want to scratch it out and try to come up with something else (or just forget about it altogether). But I'm not going to do that. What I've learned about things like this is not to worry about them so much while I'm drafting. I can always change it later. And if I wait until my piece is farther along, I'll probably have a better idea of what I really want. The key is to get something down — anything — and move on.

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Begin with the End in Mind

It ain't rocket science. It's a lot easier to get somewhere if you know where you're going when you start. Imagine getting in the car to go on vacation with your family and having no idea where you're supposed to end up. You drive for a few hours in one direction and then you head off somewhere else. You could spend days in the car and never get to a nice hotel with cable TV and a swimming pool or a really cool amusement park.

This is what writing is like when you don't know your purpose. Your purpose is where you're going, it's your destination, it's the end. When is your piece finished? When you're pretty sure you've achieved your purpose. That's why we want to be so specific about it. If you think of your purpose as simply "to entertain" or "to inform," how will you know what to write? What will your readers find entertaining? What will you inform them about? These are the more specific questions you need to be able to answer.

As I said before, when you start a piece, it's not always possible to know how you want it to end. But it helps if you can take a guess. And that's why I like to have writers come up with specific language about what they would like their readers to think or do once they've finished reading. You can always change it later. But having a purpose in mind, even if it's not exactly perfect, helps you write more quickly and more effectively.

Here's something that helps me. Often, before I finish a piece, I write out an ending. I just think about why I'm writing the piece (what I want my reader to think and/or do) and I try to come up with a simple paragraph or two. Here's a possible ending to my fish story:

> More than anything else parents do for their children, it's the time they spend with them that their kids will remember forever and value most. I know my dad gave me many birthday and Christmas gifts, and he certainly tried to give me a lot of advice, but it's the fishing that I remember most fondly. It was always something I could count on, something that brought us back together when we had been apart, something I knew we would always do again. Except that after I grew up, we didn't do it again. And I have always missed it.
>
> If I ever become a parent, I hope I'll remember to set aside enough time to be with my kids, especially regular time that they can count on. And I hope, too, that we can continue to count on our time together even after they grow up.

Is this any good? It's OK for now. I really won't know how well it works until I get the rest of the piece finished. At that point, I may discover that it's completely wrong. Or, if I'm lucky, it'll seem just perfect. But at least I have a destination in mind; I have an idea of where I'm going so I'll know when I get there. And that's going to help me get there faster and easier even if I eventually find out that it's not exactly where I want to be.

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Audience

Audience = People + Questions. Sometimes we write to specific people like friends or relatives. This happens when we write letters or send e-mail messages. But often, and especially in school, we're trying to write for a broader audience. In this case, the audience could be defined as a group of people of a certain age (kids between the ages of 9 and 12), a particular set of circumstances (parents of who have kids in our school), a specific interest (people who want ideas for fun family vacations), or any combination. The better you know your audience, the more you'll be able to understand and anticipate the kinds of questions they will have about your topic.

AUDIENCE

Who are you writing to? How would you describe them? How old are they? What are their circumstances and interests? Be as specific as you can be.

QUESTIONS

What are the key questions your audience will have about your topic? What are the most important things your audience would want to know?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Please note: Many kids want to know if they can have more than one audience. The answer is "Yes, of course you can but just pick one anyway." While it's true that many pieces are written to appeal to more than one group of people, it's hard to write to more than one audience at a time because each one has slightly different needs. If you focus on the one audience that means the most to you, and you do a good job, other audiences will probably enjoy your piece, too.

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Example

Hooking my audience and reeling them in. I have to know my audience. In fact, sometimes I can't even start a piece unless I know exactly who I'm writing for. I think this is because writing seems so much like talking to me. As I write a piece, and read it back to myself as I go along, I imagine I'm saying the words to someone else, someone in my audience. I try to imagine how they'll react. I want my readers to understand and enjoy my writing. I also want them to be influenced by it, to trust me, to believe what I have to say, and to have it affect them in a meaningful way. To accomplish this, I have to know who they are so I can write things just right.

AUDIENCE

Who are you writing to? How would you describe them? How old are they? What are their circumstances and interests? Be as specific as you can be.

Parents with young children

QUESTIONS

What are the key questions your audience will have about your topic? What are the most important things your audience would want to know?

1. What was it about fishing with my dad that made it so important to me?
2. What was one of the best times I ever had fishing with my dad?
3. Why was fishing better than other things we did together?
4. Do I still go fishing with my dad now that I'm grown up?

Is there another possible audience? As I think here about my audience, I'm very conscious of the fact that while I am writing primarily to parents, certain kids might enjoy my piece, too. I'm going to keep this thought in the back of my mind as I write. I want my piece to be read by as many people as possible. But I also know that if I try to write to all of them, I won't be able to truly reach any of them because my writing won't be clear and focused.

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The CPA Chart

MAIN IDEA The one most important thing you want your audience to know.	**KEY DETAILS** Significant information and examples that support your main idea.
THINK What you want your audience to think when they're done reading.	**DO** What you want your audience to do when they're done reading.
PEOPLE The particular person or group of people you are writing to.	**QUESTIONS** The things your audience will want to know about your topic.

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Example

MAIN IDEA The one most important thing you want your audience to know.	KEY DETAILS Significant information and examples that support your main idea.
The times in my life as a kid when I felt closest to my dad were the times when we would go fishing together.	We would often get up early on Saturday or Sunday mornings and go to Green Lake together. The time my dad talked me into going fishing when he knew they had just stocked the lake. My dad seemed really happy when we were fishing together.
THINK What you want your audience to think when they're done reading.	**DO** What you want your audience to do when they're done reading.
More than anything else you do for your children, it's the time you spend with them that they will remember forever and value most.	Try to find more time to do things with your kids. If possible, see if you can come up with things you can do on a regular basis so your kids will always know they can count on having this time with you.
PEOPLE The particular person or group of people you are writing to.	**QUESTIONS** The things your audience will want to know about your topic.
Parents with young children	What was it about fishing with my dad that made it so important to me? What was one of the best times I ever had fishing with my dad? Why was fishing better than other things we did together? Do I still go fishing with my dad now that I'm grown up?

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Using CPA for Research Writing

Research paper pre-write: Here's some pre-writing for a report on George Washington. In this case, some research has to be done before this chart can be filled out.

MAIN IDEA — The one most important thing you want your audience to know.	KEY DETAILS — Significant information and examples that support your main idea.
George Washington was a reluctant hero. He would rather have been a farmer and a family man than a great general or the President.	• He lost most of the battles he fought. • He didn't really want to be President. • His favorite thing to do was to work on his farm. • He missed his family and didn't like being away from them.
THINK — What you want your audience to think when they're done reading.	**DO** — What you want your audience to do when they're done reading.
The great heroes of American history are often a lot more like regular people than how they are portrayed in school and in the movies.	Think carefully about the way books and movies portray American heroes. Study the whole person, not just their reputation.
PEOPLE — The particular person or group of people you are writing to.	**QUESTIONS** — The things your audience will want to know about your topic.
Kids in middle school and junior high who are studying American history	• How did Washington get to be President? • Why didn't he want to be President? • What did he say about his family life and working on his plantation? • What did Washington care about most? • Why don't we usually learn about the personal side of George Washington?

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Using CPA to Respond to Prompts

A typical prompt from a test: On the previous pages you read a story about how people get along in a family. Write an essay that explains how you get along with the people in your family.

MAIN IDEA The one most important thing you want your audience to know.	KEY DETAILS Significant information and examples that support your main idea.
In order to get along in a family, everyone has to make compromises and consider how the other people feel.	• We rotate chores so no one has to do the worst jobs all the time. • We take turns on the computer and with the TV remote. • We try to be considerate about respecting each other's privacy. • When we have disagreements we try to settle them without arguing or fighting.
THINK What you want your audience to think when they're done reading.	**DO** What you want your audience to do when they're done reading.
Making compromises isn't so bad when everyone has to do it. In fact, sometimes it makes our family feel closer because each of us is giving up something so that someone else can have what they want.	Be kind and generous with the people in your family. Don't be the person who always has to have things his way.
PEOPLE The particular person or group of people you are writing to.	**QUESTIONS** The things your audience will want to know about your topic.
Kids who are growing up in large families.	• What's the secret to getting along in a big family? • How do you share things so that no one feels bad? • What's the biggest problem you've ever had and how did you fix it? • What do you do when you get angry with each other?

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Using CPA in Revision

CPA is a phenomenal revision tool. CPA is a terrific pre-writing strategy because it helps you define your entire piece. But it also works well as a revision strategy, too. If you've finished a first draft and you're not sure what you need to do to make your piece better, CPA can help. Even if you didn't do a CPA chart during pre-writing, you can do one at the revision stage. Read over your piece and try to fill in the six boxes as you go. You'll probably find that one or two boxes are empty or not completely filled out. This tells you what you need to do for revision. The "holes" in the chart show you the "holes" in your writing. Even if you can fill up the chart completely, you may find that some of what you've written isn't accounted for. This is an indication that you might not need certain parts of your piece in order for it to be successful. If this is the case, those parts can be cut. Your piece will be shorter and yet still be complete. It's always good to take out material that doesn't absolutely have to be there. Your audience will appreciate not having to read so much in order to understand what you have to say.

The single best revision you can make. A teacher once asked me, "What's the best quick fix for a piece of writing?" I thought about it for a while and then it hit me: "Revise the main idea." The main idea is the one most important thing you want your readers to know. If it's not exactly what you want, your entire piece won't be exactly what you want. Your main idea also determines everything else you decide to include in your piece. So, revising your main idea can affect many things in significant ways. Here's a step-by-step approach to revising your main idea: **(1)** Read through your piece and see if you know what your main idea is. Do you have one? Is it what you want? **(2)** Decide whether or not you need to change it or come up with one to begin with. Maybe you don't like the one you have, or possibly you don't have one at all. **(3)** Finalize your new main idea and write it in the "Main Idea" box in your CPA chart. **(4)** Now — and this is the important part — go through your piece and make sure that everything you have written supports your main idea or is related to something that does. If you find a part that isn't related, think about deleting it. (Don't worry, you can always save it for another piece at another time.)

Pick your best details. Once you get clear on your main idea, think carefully about the key details you want to include. Most of your piece will be devoted to explaining your key details. These are the parts that your readers will be most interested in. They must also serve to illustrate your main idea in clear and effective ways. By now, you know so many ways to add details to your writing that you can probably come up with many of them. So the question is "Which details do I use?" One type of detail that is always worth considering is an "anecdote." An anecdote is a little story within your story that serves as an example of a larger point (like your main idea, for example). In my story about fishing with my dad, I'm including an anecdote about one particular time when we caught a lot of fish together. I'm using this story as an example to illustrate my main idea: "The times in my life as a kid when I felt closest to my dad were the times when we would go fishing together." Anecdotes are effective because everyone loves a good story. The trick is to tell them efficiently. They can't be very long or they'll take over the whole piece.

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The CPA Revision Organizer

MAIN IDEA	KEY DETAILS
Work in this box if: (1) Your piece seems to ramble or is unfocused, it doesn't have a single controlling idea. **(2)** Your piece doesn't seem to have a point to it. **(3)** You think you might be writing about more than one topic. **(4)** You just keep writing and writing and you don't know when to end.	**Work in this box if: (1)** Your piece seems too short. **(2)** You don't have many examples that support your main idea. **(3)** Your piece doesn't seem very interesting. **(4)** Your piece doesn't make sense to people when they read it. **(5)** Your audience doesn't understand your main idea even though you've stated it clearly. **(6)** You're having trouble distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant details.
THINK	**DO**
Work in this box if: (1) You don't have an effective ending. **(2)** You don't know why you're writing this particular piece. **(3)** Your ending is just a restatement of your beginning or a summary of your main points. **(4)** Your audience is unsatisfied with your current ending. **(5)** You want your audience to keep thinking about your piece long after they've finished reading it.	**Work in this box if: (1)** You're looking for a powerful ending that really moves your reader. **(2)** You want your piece to sound more persuasive. **(3)** You think that what you're writing about is so important that readers need to take some action based on what you've told them. **(4)** You want to write a longer ending that explores in great detail the implications of what you want the reader to do.
PEOPLE	**QUESTIONS**
Work in this box if: (1) You don't know the best way to start your piece. **(2)** You have the feeling that you're just writing instead of writing to a particular person or type of person. **(3)** You're not sure if what you're writing is appropriate. **(4)** You're not sure what to write at all. **(5)** You're having trouble with style, tone, voice, or word choice.	**Work in this box if: (1)** People have a lot of questions after they've read your draft. **(2)** You've gotten started but you're not sure what to write about next. **(3)** You don't know how long your piece should be. **(4)** Your audience thinks your piece is boring. **(5)** You think you may be ignoring things that are important to your audience.

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Tips for the CPA Strategy

CPA is a big strategy. With six different boxes to fill up, and several pieces of information required for "Key Details" and "Questions," the CPA strategy can seem fairly complicated. It can take 10-15 minutes to fill out completely. In many cases, you may not be able to fill in the entire chart during pre-writing because you don't yet know enough about the piece you are working on. That's OK. Just fill in what you can and start writing. Later, as you discover more about what you want to write, go back and fill in the rest. Each part of the chart is valuable all by itself. Even if you could only fill in one of the six boxes, you would still have some valuable information that would help make your piece easier to write and more effective.

I like to start with the audience first. For me, it's easiest to start with my audience. I fill in the "People" box first and then I think about the important questions they might have. Next, I fill in the "Main Idea" and "Key Details." I leave the "Think" and "Do" boxes for last because those are always the hardest for me. You can fill in the chart in any order that works for you.

Parts of the chart are related to each other. The boxes in the CPA chart are designed to work together in certain ways. For example, you may notice that what you write in the "Questions" box seems to go with what you write in the "Key Details" box. That's just fine. It makes sense that some of the significant details you decide to include might answer some of your audience's important questions. You may also notice that you want to write the same thing in both the "Main Idea" and the "Think" boxes. That is, you may feel that for your purpose, you want your audience to be thinking about your main idea. That's just fine, too. It's very common for main idea and purpose to be similar or exactly the same. Your piece may be stronger, however, if your "Think" or "Do" boxes are different from your main idea. I like to think of it this way: my main idea is the one most important thing I want my readers to know; my purpose explains why I think it's important for them to know it and what I think they might want to do about it.

The only strategy you'll ever need. I'll admit that CPA is probably the hardest writing strategy I know. But it's also the very best. It's so good, in fact, that if you learn it well, you probably won't need any of the other pre-writing strategies in this book. Seriously. CPA is based on the definition of writing itself: "Writing is communication of *content* for a *purpose* to an *audience*." If you know your content, purpose, and audience in a piece of writing, you know the three most important things. Another thing that makes CPA so great is that it works for every kind of writing. Even though all the examples in this section were non-fiction pieces, CPA can also be used for fiction (more on that in another lesson). I'll bet it would even work for poetry, though I've never tried it that way. The moral of the story is this: CPA is hard but it's worth the effort. If you only learn one thing from all the lessons I'm showing you, learn this one: You can use CPA your whole life. You can use it in every class you take, in every year you're in school. You can take it with you to college and from there you can take it to work. CPA will never let you down, it's the Swiss Army knife of writing strategies.

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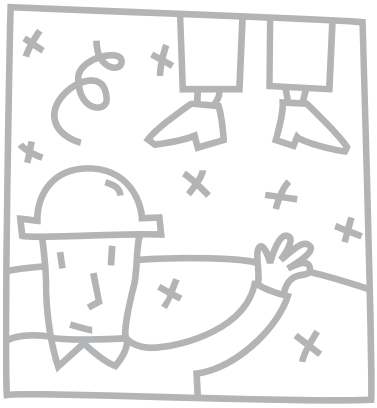

9 Great Beginnings

Has this ever happened to you? You pick up something to read, peruse a paragraph or two, and then decide to put it down. Of course it has, we've all had that experience. Readers can be fickle. They don't want to waste their time reading something that doesn't interest them. And the way most readers determine their level of interest is by reading the beginning and seeing if they like it.

When you think about creating a good beginning for a piece, there are three important criteria you want to meet. A good beginning:

- **Catches the reader's attention.** Somewhere in your first paragraph, maybe even in the first sentence, you've got to come up with something that hooks your reader, something that says "Hey, this is a good piece you're really going to enjoy!"
- **Makes the reader want to read more.** It's not enough just to hook your readers, you've got to reel them in and get them to read the rest of your piece. Your beginning has to have something in it that makes them curious about what's coming up next.
- **Is appropriate to purpose and audience.** Readers want to feel like the beginning of your piece is an invitation to an interesting and enjoyable experience. You don't want to start your piece in a way that makes people feel disrespected. They also don't want to feel that you're just wasting their time or being silly.

The beginning is the most important part of a piece of writing. Why? Because if the beginning isn't good, readers will never get to the middle or the end. Readers can be very judgmental. They are quick to evaluate a piece as being good, bad, or in between. And often, they make that evaluation after reading just a few sentences. Don't let them get away. Give them a beginning that keeps them glued to your every word. Give them a beginning that reaches out, grabs them by the collar, gives them a good shake, and says, "Hey you, reader, you need to read this!"

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Strategies for Good Beginnings

Steal from the best. So how do you find great strategies for good beginnings? Fortunately, good beginnings are everywhere in the reading you do every day. Just about everything you read has a beginning you can learn from. If you study the ways other writers begin their pieces, you can learn how to begin yours.

To help you get started, I'll show you some of my favorite good beginnings. These beginnings come from the writing of kids just like you. They were written by writers as young as first grade and as old as high school. I'll give each one a descriptive name that says a bit about the strategy I think the writer is using. And then I'll tell you why I like them. You can use any of these strategies in your own writing. Just change the words around to match the subject of your piece.

1. Start with an interesting description.

> Ashes filled the air when I was around the camp fire. Crackle, crackle it went.

In this beginning to a story about a camping trip, the writer begins with an interesting description of a camp fire. The writer is using sight and sound details that we might not normally think of and this is what makes this beginning effective for me.

2. Start with a sound.

> Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car doors slammed as we got out of the van.

Starting with a sound is a simple but effective way to get your reader's attention. In this beginning, the writer uses two sounds and a simple repetition to make the beginning even more interesting.

3. Start with the past in the present.

> It is April 10, 1912. The Titanic is going to travel all the way from England to America.

In this history piece, the writer is writing about the past but using the present tense. This pulls the reader into the story by giving it the feeling that the action is happening right now.

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More Good Beginnings

4. Start with an exclamation.

"Yeah! We're going to Disneyland tomorrow! Yeah!" I yelled about as loud as I could.

Readers can't help but get a bit excited when the first thing they read is an exclamation. Usually, the exclamation is a single word followed by an exclamation mark: "Cool!" or "Awesome!" or "Ouch!" Etc. Then, the next sentence or two tells the reader what is being exclaimed about.

5. Start with a thought.

I'm in big trouble now, I thought to myself.

If you start your piece with someone thinking about something, your readers will almost always want to know why someone is thinking about it. In this lead, don't you want to know what kind of trouble the person is in?

6. Start with a complaint.

It seems like we never go swimming at Fife pool!

In this beginning, a second grader is complaining to her parents that her family never gets to go to the pool where she likes to swim. She's expressing strong feelings here and that almost always draws the reader into the story. Of course, if the whole piece was cranky like this, it would get old pretty fast. But for a one-sentence lead, it works well.

7. Start with a surprise.

Wow! I was doing my back hand-spring and I landed it!

Chances are that if the first line of your piece begins with some kind of surprise, your reader will feel surprised, too. This beginning also starts with an exclamation and that helps convey the writer's feeling in a strong way the reader will be able to relate to.

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Even More Good Beginnings

8. Start with a question.

Have you ever been an Editor-in-Chief? Well I'll tell you, it's a big job!

If you ask a question at the beginning, your readers will find themselves wanting to answer it, and this will draw them in. Sometimes, as in this case, you don't actually answer the question at the at all. In other situations, the writer may choose to answer gradually throughout the piece. This is one of the easiest leads to come up with. But you can't use it too often because it will lose it's effectiveness if readers can predict when and how you're going to use it.

9. Start with a sound. Start with repetition. Start with a simile.

Screech, screech, screech! The first time we tried to play the recorders it sounded like a lion running his claws down a chalkboard.

This short lead actually combines three different strategies into one. It starts out with the sound of third graders making awful sounds in music class on their recorders. The sound is repeated three times for emphasis. Then, the writer uses a simile so we can understand just how annoying the sound really was. Any one of these three strategies can be used on their own to make a great beginning. Starting with a simile can be particularly effective.

10. Start with an exclamation. Start with repetition. Start with strong feelings.

Chores! Chores! Chores! Chores are boring! Scrubbing toilets, cleaning sinks, and washing bathtubs take up a lot of my time and are not fun at all.

This is the same third grade writer from #9. You can see that she's following a similar pattern for her beginning here. But instead of using a simile at the end, she uses a statement of strong feelings. Expressing strong feelings about something at the beginning of a piece usually does a good job of getting a reader's attention and drawing them in.

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And Still More Good Beginnings

11. Start with extremely strong feelings.

> The very first time I saw asparagus I hated it. I had never even tried it before and I still hated it!

This writer obviously has strong feelings about asparagus. What I also like about this lead is that she's sort of poking fun at herself when she says that she hated asparagus even though she'd never even tried it before. She knows she's overdoing it and that's what makes it sort of funny.

12. Start with a series of questions.

> Touch of the flu? Egg in her hair? Poor Ramona!

This is the opening line to a book review of one of Beverly Cleary's "Ramona Quimby" books. In addition to using the two questions in a row, what makes this lead work so well is that the writer seems to be commiserating with the character in the book. Obviously, Ramona has some challenges in this story and the writer of this review is setting us up to want to find out about them.

13. Start with a scary, exciting, or intense moment.

> ...I tried to run, but I couldn't. The monster seemed like it was growing by the minute! And then, the most horrible thing was about to happen — I screamed and sat bolt upright in bed. I gasped swallowing huge amounts of air.

This writer is starting her piece with the end of a nightmare. Her use of the ellipsis at the beginning tells us that we're right in the middle of something. Then the dash at the end of the dream signals the interruption of her waking up. It's a good description of the intensity everyone feels when they awake suddenly from a bad dream.

Here's another lead from a different story by a different writer that has almost the same quality to it. It's not as scary but it has the same kind of intensity that makes you want to know more:

> I woke up swiftly. My senses were blurred, except for my hearing. All I could hear was the sound of footsteps stepping on the creaky board in the hallway.

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Good Beginnings Galore

14. Start with your main idea.

I will always love my grandparents' beach house. The way the waves role over the gooey sand and the way the sand weaves in between your toes. The way we pick up barnacle-covered rocks and watch the sand crabs scurry away. The way we dig for clams and end up knee deep in the never ending sand.

I love this lead. This is the beginning of a descriptive essay about a family vacation spot. The writer just starts right off with the one most important thing she wants you to know: "I will always love my grandparents' beach house." But then she gives you some nice description to go with it, a few sentences that show you what she loves about it.

15. Start with a hint of something interesting to come.

It all started on an average day. I didn't think anything unusual was going to happen, but boy was I wrong!

One of the best ways to hook your readers is to give them just a hint of something interesting without telling them what it is. This lead does a nice job of that. We can't help but wonder what unusual thing happened that day.

16. Start with an interesting conversation.

"We're moving."
That's what she told me. I couldn't believe it! I had just made the basketball team and was making more friends.
"What!" I exclaimed.

Most of us can't resist listening in on a good conversation. That's why most readers like dialog so much. It's even better if you can introduce a conflict like the one the writer sets up here. I like how sparse the dialog is; it's just three words. But the writer gives us a great sense of how final the decision is (the parent obviously doesn't want to discuss things; the decision has been made) and how frustrated the kid is.

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Good Beginnings Ad Infinitum

17. Start by revealing something unusual.

"Company halt!" yelled the drill master. My mom stopped and went into position. Her dog tags clinked as she moved.

I don't know about you, but when I hear a drill master say, "Company halt!" I don't expect to find somebody's mother in the ranks. Of course, there are many women in the military, and many of them either are or will be mothers, but the writer is playing on a prejudice here that he knows most readers will have, a prejudice that makes his lead more effective because it reveals something unusual about the story.

18. Start with an unsettling description.

A flash of lightning illuminates the harsh emptiness of the night. In an orphanage children cry mournfully. They are starving.

Sometimes the best way to get a reader's attention is to show them a picture of something they probably don't want to see. You have to be careful when you do this because you don't want to offend anyone or make them feel so uncomfortable that they stop reading. But this sixth grade writer is clearly in control of her language and that's what makes it so successful.

19. Start with an unusual image of a character.

Simon Wilken was snacking down on a plum with great gusto.

The thought of a guy tearing into a plum is just strange enough to get your attention. Now, of course, the writer will have to keep it going by continuing with some equally compelling description. There's great word choice here in the verb phrase "snacking down" and in the adverbial phrase "with great gusto." The strong verb and thoughtful modifier give us a very specific sense of how this person is eating.

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Good Beginnings Etc.

20. Start with an interesting anecdote.

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat."

In addition to exhibiting some nice sentence fluency, this lead ends with something we just don't expect to hear from the Father of Our Country. It's funny and it also serves as a good example of the writer's thesis in this research paper: George Washington was really a pretty normal guy and not the aloof, untouchable leader we often think of him as. The writer is using a technique called an "anecdote." An anecdote is a little story within a larger piece that serves as an example of an important point.

Here's another great beginning to a research paper that uses an anecdote to set up the writer's thesis. In this case, the writer is telling a personal story that leads perfectly into the subject of his report:

21 July 1994. Twenty-one shots fired into the air, the traditional volleys of the United States Marine Corps, in commemoration of fallen comrades who sacrificed their lives in one of the bloodiest assaults of World War II in the Pacific theater. It was one of the few contributions by the Americans in this memorial ceremony, and I could not comprehend why the service was so disproportionately representative of Japan. I scanned the assembled crowd, but only periodically noticed an American uniform in the sea of former Japanese troops. I was on the island of Guam, accompanied by my grandfather, at the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the American invasion of this formerly Japanese-occupied island. This particular service was the American-Japanese joint memorial ceremony, the only event which united the American and Japanese veterans during the entire week. I was confused by the low American attendance, having joined hundreds of U.S. vets at the various memorial services earlier in the week. Standing in the crowd, my reaction was one of embarrassment fueled by an expectation that the low turnout of American veterans represented their inability to overcome racial hatred.

The anecdote is one of the most commonly used techniques for beginning a piece of non-fiction writing . You see it all the time in magazine journalism and popular history.

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Good Beginnings Cont.

21. Start by describing the setting.

The deafening crowd was packed into the Kingdome on sold-out Buhner Buzz-Cut Night. Hundreds of people, outfitted in brand new buzz-cuts, were enjoying the Mariner game.

You can always start just by setting the scene. It's one of the easiest strategies to use. But use good descriptive language when you do it. A phrase like, "The deafening crowd was packed into the Kingdome" with a nice adjective ("deafening") and a strong verb ("packed"), paints a good picture in the reader's mind and reinforces the feeling of an important night at the ball park.

22. Start by addressing the audience.

You all know Bill Gates. When you hear that name you think "Billionaire" or "Lucky Guy," but you haven't really looked deep enough.

One way to get your readers' attention is just to talk to them directly. Here's another way to do it:

You walk into the dentist's office. You sit down. You try to read a magazine. But it's no use. You're scared and there's nothing you can do about it.

You don't want to use this technique too much. You can easily overdo it. You can annoy your reader and you really don't want to do that, do you?

23. Start by "showing" how someone feels.

I sat in my desk, sweat dripping down my face. I shut my eyes tight, then opened them. I looked at my watch, 11:27. Three minutes! Three minutes until I heard a sound, a sound that would set me free for three months of total nothingness.

This is a great description of a kid who can't wait for the school year to end. But rather than just say something like, "I couldn't wait for the school year to end," the writer gives you an extended description that "shows" you how he feels.

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What? More Good Beginnings?

24. Start by telling a story in a comic way.

"Oh my God!" I exclaimed, "What's John doing out there? Why is he on his hands and knees, Mom?" I looked out the big kitchen window wondering if my eight-year old brother was all right. He was looking distressed. Then he threw up.

Let me be the first one to say that throwing up is not exactly a barrel of monkeys. Under normal circumstances, this is not the kind of beginning I would encourage. But it's so well written. The key is in the sentence fluency. The writer starts out with some long sentences that set up the scene. And then, as she gets to the "punch line," she uses two very short sentences that give the whole thing a funny, matter-of-fact quality, as though her little brother does this kind of thing all the time. This is also another use of the "anecdote" strategy.

25. Start by challenging the reader.

Colin Greer, the President of the New World Foundation, a civil rights organization in New York, has something to say about your character.

Another way to get your readers involved is to challenge them in some way. Here, the writer is suggesting, without really saying it, that I might have something wrong with my character and that this guy, Colin Greer, some New York hotshot from some big foundation, knows how to fix my problem. Hmmm... This kind of lead is sure to get a reaction but sometimes it's a bad one, so be careful when you do this. The idea is to challenge your readers, not pick a fight with them.

26. Start by focusing your audience's attention on something important.

In my old, battered, black wallet I carry many things. A letter from a friend. My lunch ticket. My social security card. Many other tidbits and items as well. There is one thing however, which I prize above all my possessions. It is a photograph.

This whole piece is about a photograph that is very important to the writer. So, to get us started, he leads us on a little trip through his wallet that ends with a very short sentence about the thing he wants us to think about. Many writers will set up their first paragraph this way. They'll start out in one place and lead you around for a little while until they end up, in the very last sentence, by telling you exactly what the piece is about.

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Yes! More Good Beginnings!

27. Start with a list.

The sweat on your brow. A layer of dust on your face. Out in the woods. Somewhere. And on a horse. Of all the places in the world, I feel best on a horse.

This is similar in effect to the previous lead. Here, the writer just gives us a list of descriptive elements without any real context. We're left guessing about the topic. Each item in his list is a sentence fragment, and that adds to the feeling we get of wanting more information. Finally, he tells us what he's talking about and, thankfully, gives us a complete sentence so we can feel that the trail of ideas has come to a proper stopping point.

28. Start with a scenario.

Right now I want you to pretend you are in a store. As you walk around, you see that some products are much less expensive. Now, look at the labels on these cheaper items. You will probably notice that many of these labels say, "Made in China," or "Made in Honduras." Have you ever stopped to wonder why products made in these countries are so much more affordable than the things manufactured right here on American soil?

In this beginning, the writer puts us in a made up situation for the purpose of having us experience a problem he wants us to know about. Like the other "you" leads, this one will work as long as you don't overdo it.

29. Start with fantasy or fairy tale-type language.

In yesteryear, when Moby Dick was just a tadpole, and the seas rolled and thundered over the jetties and onto the shore, I searched for my first sand dollar still hidden somewhere in the ever stretching Long Beach Peninsula.

This is the beginning to a simple essay about a kid finding sand dollars on a vacation. But the beginning really stands out because he writes it up as though it happened long, long ago in fairy tale time. It's a true story, but this type of beginning fictionalizes it just a bit and that makes it sound like it's going to be more fun than the typical "When I was a kid, I used to find sand dollars at the beach" story. This style of beginning gives the story a child-like, mystical quality that fits the subject matter perfectly.

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Good Beginnings (Again? Still?)

30. Start with simple action that leads to a complex realization.

> I walk up the hill with my friends, then turn into our cul-de-sac, go to the front door, put the key in the lock, turn, and step in. The house breathes a spooky hello as I set my books down and go to the kitchen where the inevitable note is waiting: "Have a snack. Be home soon. I love you."

This is how a lot of good movies begin. In this piece, the author starts by describing a simple walk home from school. But as the kid enters the house, things change just a bit. And finally, when he reads the note from his mom, and realizes he's alone again, that causes him to have a whole bunch of complicated feelings which he spends the rest of the piece telling us about. This kid is writing about what it's like to be an only child when your parents work and you're often left alone. This beginning does a good job of leading us into that feeling without actually telling us about it.

31. Start with a startling statement.

> A great crime was committed against a people in 1942. This was the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt which called for the eviction and internment of all Japanese Americans.

This is a great start to a research paper. It draws our attention to the subject matter by casting it in a horrific light. We can't help but have questions like "What crime?" or "Which people?"

32. Start with your thesis.

> Education is a key element in developing the skills necessary for a successful life. Too often, students are more involved earning a paycheck than spending time on their academic studies. Students need to realize that their high school classes will prepare them for a brighter future.

This is the beginning of a persuasive essay that discusses the pros and cons of high school students having part-time jobs. She's obviously against it. So, she just starts off with her thesis statement around which the rest of the essay will be based. This is not a flashy or unusual way to start a piece. But often, it's very effective, especially if you feel your readers are not in the mood for anything clever or complicated.

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Finally! The Last Good Beginnings!

33. Start with something outlandish, eccentric, flamboyant, fantastical.

> I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I write award-winning operas. I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

Personally, I find this lead very entertaining. The first time I read it, I almost thought the writer was being serious. Obviously he isn't. This kind of beginning certainly won't be attractive to all kinds of readers. Some will think it inappropriately silly. It's unusual, that's for sure. But the writer seems to be in control of what he's doing. He's doing something unusual in a way that works — at least and I see it — and that's what counts in the end.

34. Start with fast action.

> I raced inside, slamming the front door behind me. I plopped my backpack on the floor and dashed for the kitchen. Our cat, asleep in the hallway, quickly awoke and scurried out of harm's way. I knew I only had a few precious seconds before my brother, coming in through the back door, beat me to the kitchen and nabbed the last of mom's brownies.

You can't lose with a good action sequence. One of the secrets to good action writing is the use of interesting verbs ("raced, plopped, dashed, scurried, nabbed"). Strong verbs make for strong writing. In this case, they make the lead sound more dramatic, more intense.

35. Start with a saying.

> It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of simple minds." He said it almost 200 years ago, but perhaps it bears repeating today to our senators and congressman who act as though our country can continue to spend money it does not have.

So many smart people have said so many smart things. Why not let them speak for you? A common technique is to use a famous saying to make a point. As long as your readers are somewhat familiar with the quotation and its context, this type of beginning works well.

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Not-So-Good Beginnings

Strategies you might consider not using. Without disparaging in any way, shape, or form the creative genius of any writer living, dead, or hereinafter to be born, I respectfully request that certain beginnings no longer be used. (Please note: There's not a one of us, myself included, who hasn't used each and every one of these beginnings at some point in time. Now that we're all experts on the best ways to start a piece of writing we can, of course, laugh at these simple lapses in writerly judgment. But let's not forget that we've all had them, too.)

1. The "telephone call" beginning.

> Hi! My name is Steve. Blah, blah, blah...

Unless I'm calling someone on the phone to get them to buy something from me, (or writing a piece about telemarketing) there is no legitimate reason why this beginning should ever be used.

2. The completely unnecessary beginning.

> In this paper, I will be telling you about blah, blah, blah...

I should always trust that my readers are smart enough to figure out on their own what my piece is about. Telling them ahead of time doesn't win me any points. And, if my piece turns out to be about something different, then I've really gotten myself into a pickle, haven't I?

3. The "non-beginning" beginning.

> One day, blah, blah, blah...

While this may be the well-intentioned opening of many an earnest yarn, it is not properly a beginning at all. It doesn't do anything; it just sits there on the paper, staring at us, thinking: "Couldn't come up with a real beginning, could you?" We could all spare ourselves this indignity by simply trying any other beginning at all (as long as it's not on this page). So let's just do it, shall we? Similarly weak variations on the "non-beginning" beginning include "Once..." and "One time...". Though not quite as bad, but still rather unexciting, the following beginnings may be used on an extremely limited basis and only in desperate situations (such as official prompted writing assessments for state tests): "Last year...", "Last week...", "A year ago...", "Last month,...", "A month ago,...", "A week ago...", "A day ago...", "A few days ago...", "A couple of days ago...", and so on.

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Tips for Good Beginnings

Start with the models. The easiest way to get started writing your own good beginnings is to use the models you already have. It isn't considered cheating to model one's writing after the writing of another. The easiest models to start with are the short ones. Some of the strategies can be accomplished in your own pieces with just a single sentence. You'll notice, too, that some of the strategies can be combined. The models are a great resource for you. They will always give you something to think about when you're stuck. And, as you become more familiar with them, they will be easier to use. You'll probably find that you end up being better at some kinds of beginnings than others. That's just fine. You may also find that you like to change your beginnings in certain ways that are different from the models. The models are a starting point. Where you end up is up to you.

Try several beginnings for each piece. I almost always advise writers to try several different beginnings for each piece that they write. This may seem like a lot of extra work. It is. But it's really worth it. As I've said before, the beginning is the most important part of your piece. And you may not necessarily be in the best position to know which beginning is most effective. What I usually suggest is this: Try three different beginnings. Read them all to your class. Let your audience tell you which one they like best. Even if you already have a favorite, get this feedback from your audience. You don't have to do what they want. But it's always good to take the opinions of other writers into consideration.

Reread, rethink, revise. Once you have a lead that you like, look it over closely. Read it to yourself many times. Look for small ways to make it better. Change a word here or there. Improve the punctuation. Give the beginning of your piece extra care and attention so it comes out just right. And don't forget to share it with others to get their opinions, too.

Variety is the spice of life. After a while, you will find that some beginnings come quite easily to you. The temptation will be to use these types of beginnings over and over on every piece you write. Resist this temptation. In the first place, your readers will really appreciate it if you use many different kinds of beginnings. In the second, each type of beginning that you master makes you a better writer.

Start your own collection. Ultimately, you'll want to move away from using the models I've presented here and start thinking about your own models. What kinds of beginnings do you like? Why do you like them? You can collect them the same way I do. When you read a beginning you like, copy it down. When you hear or read something that another writer in your class has come up with, get a copy of that, too. For each beginning you collect, give it a title that describes how it works. Then write a few words about why you think it's good. One of the best ways to learn to write is to model your writing after the writing of other writers you enjoy.

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A Glossary of Good Beginnings

1. Interesting description. Ashes filled the air when I was around the camp fire. Crackle, crackle it went.

2. Sound. Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car doors slammed as we got out of the van.

3. The past in the present. It is April 10, 1912. The Titanic is going to travel all the way from England to America.

4. Exclamation. Yeah! We're going to Disneyland tomorrow! Yeah!" I yelled about as loud as I could.

5. A thought. I'm in big trouble now, I thought to myself.

6. A complaint. It seems like we never go swimming at Fife pool!

7. A surprise. Wow! I was doing my back hand-spring and I landed it!

8. A question. Have you ever been an Editor-in-Chief? Well I'll tell you, it's a big job!

9. Sound, repetition, and simile. Screech, screech, screech! The first time we tried to play the recorders it sounded like a lion running his claws down a chalkboard.

10. Exclamation, repetition, strong feelings. Chores! Chores! Chores! Chores are boring! Scrubbing toilets, cleaning sinks, and washing bathtubs take up a lot of my time and are not fun at all.

11. Extremely strong feelings. The very first time I saw asparagus I hated it. I had never even tried it before and I still hated it!

12. A series of questions. Touch of the flu? Egg in her hair? Poor Ramona!

13. Scary, exciting, or intense moment. . . .I tried to run, but I couldn't. The monster seemed like it was growing by the minute! And then, the most horrible thing was about to happen —— I screamed and sat bolt upright in bed. I gasped swallowing huge amounts of air.

14. Main idea. I will always love my grandparents' beach house. The way the waves role over the gooey sand and the way the sand weaves in between your toes. The way we pick up barnacle-covered rocks and watch the sand crabs scurry away. The way we dig for clams and end up knee deep in the never ending sand.

15. Something interesting to come. It all started on an average day. I didn't think anything unusual was going to happen, but boy was I wrong!

16. Conversation. "We're moving." That's what she told me. I couldn't believe it! I had just made the basketball team and was making more friends. "What!" I exclaimed.

17. Reveal something unusual. "Company halt!" yelled the drill master. My mom stopped and went into position. Her dog tags clinked as she moved.

18. An unsettling description. A flash of lightning illuminates the harsh emptiness of the night. In an orphanage children cry mournfully. They are starving.

19. Unusual image of a character. Simon Wilken was snacking down on a plum with great gusto.

20. Anecdote. On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat."

21. Describe the setting. The deafening crowd was packed into the Kingdome on the sold-out Buhner Buzz-Cut Night. Hundreds of people were outfitted in brand new buzz-cuts and were enjoying the Mariner game.

22. Address the audience. You walk into the dentist's office. You sit down. You try to read a magazine. But it's no use. You're scared and there's nothing you can do about it.

23. "Show" feelings. I sat in my desk, sweat dripping down my face. I shut my eyes tight, then opened them. I looked at my watch, 11:27. Three minutes! Three minutes until I heard a sound, a sound that would set me free for three months of total nothingness.

24. Comic story. "Oh my God!" I exclaimed, "What's John doing out there? Why is he on his hands and knees, Mom?" I looked out the big kitchen window wondering if my eight-year old brother was all right. He was looking distressed. Then he threw up.

25. Challenge the reader. Colin Greer, the President of the New World Foundation, a civil rights organization in New York, has something to say about your character.

26. Focus on something important. In my old, battered, black wallet I carry many things. A letter from a friend. My lunch ticket. My social security card. Many other tidbits and items as well. There is one thing however, which I prize above all my possessions. It is a photograph.

27. A list. The sweat on your brow. A layer of dust on your face. Out in the woods. Somewhere. And on a horse. Of all the places in the world, I feel best on a horse.

28. A scenario. Right now I want you to pretend you are in a store. As you walk around, you see that some products are much more inexpensive. Now, look at the labels on these cheaper items. You will probably notice that many of these labels say, "Made in China," or "Made in Honduras." Have you ever stopped to wonder why products made in these countries are so much more affordable than the things manufactured right here on American soil?

29. Fantasy or fairy tale-type language. In yesteryear, when Moby Dick was just a tadpole, and the seas rolled and thundered over the jetties and onto the shore, I searched for my first sand dollar still hidden somewhere in the ever stretching Long Beach Peninsula.

30. Simple action to complex realization. I walk up the hill with my friends, then turn into our cul-de-sac, go to the front door, put the key in the lock, turn, and step in. The house breathes a kind of spooky hello as I set my books down and go to the kitchen where the inevitable note is waiting: "Have a snack. Be home soon. I love you."

31. Startling statement. A great crime was committed against a people in 1942. This was the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which called for the eviction and internment of all Japanese Americans.

32. Thesis. Education is a key element in developing the skills necessary for a successful life. Too often, students are more involved earning a paycheck than spending time on their academic studies. Students need to realize that their high school classes will prepare them for a brighter future.

33. Something outlandish. I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I write award-winning operas. I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

34. Fast action. I raced inside, slamming the front door behind me. I plopped my backpack on the floor and dashed for the kitchen. Our cat, asleep in the hallway, quickly awoke and scurried out of harms way. I knew I only had a few precious seconds before my brother, coming in through the back door, beat me to the kitchen and nabbed the last of mom's brownies.

35. A saying. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of simple minds." He said it almost 200 years ago, but perhaps it bears repeating today to our senators and congressman who act as though our country can continue to spend money it does not have.

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10 Happy Endings

I'll tell ya something right up front. Endings are hard. Everybody struggles with them. Some writers rewrite their endings 20 times. That's just the way it is. Of course, there are things we can do to make it easier. And that's what we'll talk about here. But make no mistake: endings are, for most of us, the hardest things to write.

When you're trying to come up with a good ending for a piece, there are three things you need to think about. A good ending should:

- **Feel finished.** A good ending has a certain feel to it, and that feeling is one of completeness: there's nothing else the writer needs to say, the piece has been wrapped up, summed up, and tied up so completely that the reader feels completely satisfied.
- **Give the reader something to think about or do.** Readers like to ponder a bit at the end of a piece, they like to have something to consider, something to reflect on, something to take with them for the future. Ideally, your ideas will linger in their mind long after they've read your last sentence. That's the test of truly effective writing.
- **Meet your reader's expectations.** With the beginning and middle of your piece, you've set up certain expectations in the minds of your readers. Your ending has to live up to those expectations, it has to fulfill the promise of everything that has come before.

Too often, readers feel let down by the ending. And that can ruin their entire experience of a piece. It's not that readers are mean people with impossibly high standards. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Your readers want you to have a great ending so badly that they often can't help but disappoint themselves. This is just another reason why endings are so important and why good endings are so hard to write.

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Strategies for Good Endings

Learning from other writers. As we did with beginnings, we're going to learn how to write our own endings by studying the endings of other writers just like us. I haven't come across as many different types of endings as I have types of beginnings. In fact, even though I've put many of these endings into different categories, they might all seem very similar to you. I think the reason why there are not as many different types of endings has to do with what readers expect when they get to the end of a piece. At the beginning of a piece, readers have very few expectations and that means writers have more freedom to do whatever they want. But endings are different. When readers get to the end of a piece, they already have an inkling of the kind of ending they want, the words that have come before by way of introduction narrow the writer's choices for words at the conclusion.

1. End with some advice.

> If you cannot swallow and your throat is puffy, then you have strep. You should get lots of rest. And get a shot because the shot will make you better faster than the medicine.
>
> If you're thinking about going skydiving, take my advice: stop thinking.

It just seems like part of being human to want to tell other humans what we think they should do. But more importantly, it makes for a good ending. As one of my favorite sayings goes, "Take my advice. I'm not using it."

2. End with your big feeling.

> Oh Yeah! Here is some thing really funny. My hair still smells like smoke. I love campfires.
>
> Finally the parade was done. We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had.
>
> When it's time to go, none of us wants to leave. As I say my good-byes, I think of all the fun we had, and what fun we will have next time.

Sometimes, at the end of an important experience, what we're left with is a single overwhelming feeling (hopefully, a good one). But even if we're sad or angry or scared, ending with a big feeling usually works.

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More Good Endings

3. End with something you want your readers to remember.

Remember, even though the Mariners are losing doesn't mean they're a bad team.

So always remember to keep an extra key somewhere. You never know when you might need it.

This is similar to the "advice" ending. It works because it gives the reader something specific to think about.

4. End with something you want your readers to do.

There were 300 families with no homes because of the fire. They couldn't put out the fire because they had no sprinklers. I am mad because fires can kill people. Next time buy some sprinklers.

Down with the dolls! Get rid of every store that carries them! Let the revolution for a Barbie-free America begin!

If you care about the lives of your children and the quality of your community, then vote for tomorrow's school levy. It's the best way to guarantee a bright future for everyone.

Make a commitment to getting in shape today. Turn off the television, put down whatever it is you're reading (unless it's this essay, of course), start living a healthy life right now. You'll be glad you did.

This is a very strong type of ending. Telling your readers to go out and do something is a big deal because most of us don't like to do the things that other people tell us to do. But if what you have to say is really important to you, then this type of ending might be just what you're looking for. It is most commonly found in persuasive pieces when people write about important political,social, and community issues.

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Even More Good Endings

5. End by thinking about the future.

Last year was definitely the hardest, craziest year of my life. And I loved it! Things are going great. I never knew the incredible feeling of accomplishing things that in the past seemed impossible — not only with school, but with my entire life. Every day is another chance to do something great. And now I have the confidence and motivation to conquer anything that is put forth in front of me. I feel I owe this to many things and to many people, but most of all I owe it to myself. Now I think about the consequences of everything I do and say. And this helps me make better decisions, decisions that help me build a better future. The future! For the first time I'm looking forward to it.

Everybody's always talking about adults being good role models for kids, but maybe we should be models for them. Maybe we could teach them a few things about how to have a good time and enjoy life. It's worth a try. I'd hate to think that the way growing up seems to me now is the way it's going to be when I get there.

Kids dealing with the character issue is also good because we need to learn how to build our characters. Then, like Greer said, maybe we'll have new kinds of political leaders and we'll see society change.

Most of us think about the future all the time. It's a normal and natural thing. And I think that's why this type of ending feels normal and natural, too.

6. End with something you learned.

I learned that I shouldn't lie because it gets me into worse trouble. In the future I'm not going to lie. If I have a problem, I'm going to tell someone about it, and ask for help.

From the wars in Korea and Vietnam, our country learned painful but valuable lessons that will guide our foreign policy well into the next century and beyond.

This is the classic "moral of the story" ending that most of us remember from when our parents read us stories. But it makes a perfectly good ending for older kids and adults, too.

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And Still More Good Endings

7. End with a recommendation.

I recommend this book for readers who like adventures and interesting stories.

Even after all the bad things that happened, it was still a fun trip. If you go there, I can't guarantee you won't have all the problems we did. But I can recommend this vacation to any family who wants something out of the ordinary — and a real challenge.

Even though the food was pretty good and it wasn't too expensive, I'm afraid I can't recommend this restaurant to everyone. It was very noisy and the service was slow. I don't think it would be a good choice for families with small children.

Much like the "advice" ending, the "recommendation" ending also tells the reader to go out and do something (or not do something). But it's a little friendlier, not quite as strong. It feels more like a suggestion or an invitation than a demand.

8. End with your main idea.

Chores aren't the worst but they're definitely not the best!

An actor acts. A hero helps. The actor becomes famous and the hero does not. And that's just it: Heroes don't care about the credit, they just care.

So, while having a neat room with nothing disturbed is great, I'd take a brother or sister in a minute if I could. The big irony is, if I had that mythical brother or sister, I would probably be wishing myself an only child again the first time my baseball shirt didn't come back or my stereo got broken. Life is like that. What you don't have always seems to be the thing you want.

The last thing your readers read is what they'll probably remember best. So why not leave them with the one most important thing you want them to know? Ending with your main idea is almost always a good strategy. The hard part is building up to it slowly and saving it for last.

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Good Endings Galore

9. End with your main idea and its implications.

I always used to think of George Washington as a soldier and a politician, and I guess I always will. But he was really just a farmer. He reminds me a little of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. All she wanted to do was get back home. And finally the Wizard told her she could just click her red shoes three times and say "There's no place like home." But George Washington and his men didn't have shoes when they went across the Delaware River. Maybe if they did, history would have turned out completely different.

Henry Ford's revolutionary thinking affected the lives of many Americans. The Ford Motor Company became one of the largest industrial companies in the world, and a household name. Opportunity to be mobile in a Ford car gave the open road to the ordinary American. Businesses boomed in the hard times of the Depression because the auto gave the opportunity for work to many. The American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was more possible behind the wheel of a Ford. Americans today still have a love affair with cars thanks to Henry Ford and his revolutionary thinking.

Here's another type of main idea ending. In this case, the writers are starting their final paragraphs with their main idea but then going just a little bit further. This is a great strategy, especially for research papers and other expository writing, because it not only tells readers the one most important thing you want them to know, it tells them why that one thing is so important. I had a college teacher once who called this the "So what?" He would read our papers and then say, "So what? You just told me this big thing. Why is it important to me?" This wasn't really as harsh as it sounds — he was smiling when he said it. Actually, he helped me discover one of the most valuable lessons I've ever learned: Sometimes it isn't enough just to say what you think. You need to tell people why what you think is so important.

One of the things I encourage kids to do in their endings is to go just a bit farther than they think they can. I know that sounds weird. I mean, the end should be the end, right? But it's not. You can get to the end of something that happened to you and find that there's still a lot more to talk about. And here's where you'll discover a wonderful opportunity. You see, if someone has followed your story all the way to the end, that means they're really interested in what you have to say. And when people are interested in what you have to say, you shouldn't waste the opportunity to tell them something really important. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, I often use my endings to tell people why I think the ideas I've been writing about might be important to them. You can tell your readers what's important to you.

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Good Endings Ad Infinitum

10. End with the effect on you or others.

> While all this happened, another close neighbor had witnessed the incident and called 911. It was decided afterward that the dog had contracted rabies and he was soon put to sleep. I was given a series of shots and a few stitches only, and after a couple of years, my leg healed, but the scars remain on both the inside and out.

> The internment of the Japanese Americans was one of the lowest points in United States history. We did it out of revenge and out of hate. The fear that we felt after the attack at Pearl Harbor was well founded, but the internment was not the way to overcome it. The internment hurt so many people so deeply and really accomplished nothing in the short run. In the long run, it brought nothing but shame upon us.

This is another style of ending that tries to answer the "So what?" question. This type of ending always seems very serious and profound to me. And I guess that's why I like it so much. Often, when writers do this, they try to make the case, as these two writers have, that the consequences of a particular action or event are permanent and significant.

11. End with a question.

> As this miracle Mariner season comes to a close, the one thought on every fan's mind is this: Can they do it again next year?

> Will the human race ever see the irony in destroying the planet that is its only home? How much more evidence do we need before we take global warming seriously?

> I guess what still bothers me is how confused I am about what happened. If I was ever in that same situation again, would I act the same way, or would I do something different?

If you can start a piece with questions, can you end a piece with questions, too? Why do writers use questions so often? Why are questions so effective in writing? Would it be possible to create a piece entirely out of questions? Does this paragraph give you any hints about that?

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Good Endings Etc.

12. End by mentioning a sequel.

As soon as I walked in the dining room I smelled trouble. I looked down at my plate and saw what I smelled! Brussels sprouts! I gave a loud tragic moan and knew there was going to be another story written by Alex Carter. But for now, I would feed my brussels sprouts to the fish.

And so ends another after school adventure, or misadventure, I should say. Stay tuned for the further misadventures of a kid with not enough homework to keep him out of trouble and way too many crazy ideas.

If you liked the original, you'll probably like the sequel, too. At least that's the thinking behind this type of ending. Writers love to be read. And some are not merely content with the fact that you're reading their current piece. They want you to read their next piece, too. So they put a little advertisement for it right in the ending.

13. End with a reflective evaluation.

So I guess that I lived happily ever after except that I couldn't walk for the rest of the trip. Maybe that day hike wasn't so cool after all.

From that point on my life has been good. Except for the chores. I think my mom got the better end of the deal on that one.

BRRRIIINNNGGG! The bell rang! I pulled on my backpack, tore out of the room, sprinted down the stairs, sped down the hallway, and bounded out the door. I dashed home and grabbed a snack. I popped a video into the VCR, turned on the TV, and relaxed. Ahhhhhh! What a glorious day!

My whole world seems to be more on track now that she's gone. My self-confidence, my general attitude has improved immensely. I do miss her sometimes. How could I not after three years of friendship? All I can think is that I was a good friend to her. Our relationship didn't survive, but we'll always have the laughs... and the tears.

Often, when we find ourselves at the end of something, we want to make a judgment about it. We look back over the entire experience and ask ourselves: Was it good? Was it bad? How did things turn out for me? What's the bottom line? And then we try to sum things up as best we can.

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Good Endings Cont.

14. End with a wish or a hope or a dream.

Now I'm looking at John, over the mess on the kitchen table, wondering if he's all right, because he's only eight years old, and that was a lot of throwing up to do. Then he gets to go out and play with his friend just like he wanted. I feel a little cheated. Would I have gotten to go back out if that was me? I really wish he could have the experience of a younger sibling just so he would know how I feel.

I hope someday that I can be a good parent just like my mom. But until then, I'll just work on being a good kid.

Even now, years later, I still dream of what my life might have been like.

I think that Jay Buhner is a true hero. The Seattle Mariners would be lacking an excellent right fielder without him. I hope he stays in Seattle for the rest of his baseball career.

This is similar to the "future" ending but it's a bit more subtle and, to my way of thinking, a bit a bit more effective, too. I guess I can't help but identify with someone else's hopes and dreams.

15. End with a tribute.

I salute you, Lieutenant John Olson. May your bravery and courage be passed on so that someone else may look up to you and yours, and honor them as I do.

Mark was the best friend I ever had. There when I need him, gone when he knew I needed to be alone. And I feel darn privileged of having the honor of being his blood-brother. I just wish we could have carted him along when we moved here to Canby. God bless his soul. I'm never going to forget him.

This is a great type of ending when you're writing about a person or a place you want to honor with words.

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One Last Really Good Ending

I saved the best one for last. One of my favorite kinds of endings is, in my humble opinion, so cool that it deserves a bit of an introduction. Reading a piece of writing is like taking a little trip. The writer picks you up at the beginning and carts you off to different places with each new idea. Finally, you arrive at your destination. With luck, you've not only enjoyed the ride, you appreciate where you've been dropped off at the end. But wouldn't it be nice if the writer could get you all the way back home to where you started in the first place? That's what a "wrap-around" ending does. It manages to finish off the piece by using the beginning again at the end.

16. End with what you started with. (A "wrap-around" ending.)

Here's an example of a wrap-around ending from a very clever second grader. Her story is a simple one about watching a parade. But the way she works the beginning and the end belies her age in its sophistication.

> Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car door slammed as we got out of the van. Buses lined up on the sidewalk. The screeches of the buses got annoying. Screech! Screech! We walked and walked until we found a place to sit for the parade. I saw a Grease van and someone threw me a daffodil. The daffodil petals were soft, and it smelled pretty. A Titanic float sailed by. All schools had cheers. One school's band was Star Wars. A dummy was shot out of a cannon. It made me jump! We ate snacks at the parade like sandwiches and juice and carrots. They were good. The parade was two hours. We sat on a blanket. Things blew everywhere when the float went by whew-clunk. Finally the parade was done. We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had.

Not too shabby for a seven-year old, eh? (I corrected some of the spelling here, but the words are all hers.) Actually, her teacher and I had been doing some ending lessons in her class and the wrap-around ending was one of the ones we spent time on. Still, I think she was the only student who tried it.

Another wrap-around example. On the next page you'll see another example of a wrap-around, this time in a research paper by a sixth grade writer. In this case, the end doesn't mirror the beginning quite as literally as was the case in the "parade" piece. Here, the writer brings back just one small but memorable part of the first paragraph and uses it to end his paper on a playful note.

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Another Example

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat." He was talking to General Henry Knox (they called him "Ox" for short). There's a painting of George Washington where he's standing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for Redcoats. I always thought he just wanted a good view. But I guess the reason he was standing was because he didn't have a place to sit down.

Finding a seat in his own boat was hardly the worst of General Washington's problems. It was cold and wet and icy, and his men were tired and didn't have warm clothes to wear or even enough food to eat. The Revolutionary War was hard on everyone, but it was hard on Washington most of all because he wanted to be home with his wife and children.

From 1759, until he was called to fight in 1775, Washington lived with his wife, Martha, and her two children. Washington loved his big farm in Mt. Vernon, Virginia, and although he was one of our country's most brilliant generals, he was really just a farmer at heart. In a letter he wrote to a friend in England, he said, "I can nowhere find such great satisfaction as in working on my plantation." He didn't even want to be President. He said he would feel like a criminal going to his death if he took office. But after everyone voted for him, he felt it was his duty to accept.

Washington was our President for the next eight years, but during that time he just wanted to get back home. He would spend weekends there whenever he could, and he made sure he got reports on the condition of his farm. He also liked getting letters from his family.

Then, in March of 1797, Washington finally got to go home for good. There were no more wars to fight, and John Adams was going to be President. Washington had been a good President, but he was tired of it. Even his granddaughter noticed how happy he was to be home. In a letter to a friend she wrote, "Grandpa is much pleased with being once more Farmer Washington."

I always used to think of George Washington as a soldier and a politician, and I guess I always will. But he was really just a farmer. He reminds me a little of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. All she wanted to do was get back home. And finally the Wizard told her she could just click her red shoes three times and say "There's no place like home." But George Washington and his men didn't have shoes when they went across the Delaware River. Maybe if they did, history would have turned out completely different.

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Endings That Should Not Be Used

Some endings are worse than others. Having already told you how hard I think endings are, I certainly won't be too grumpy if you occasionally write a bad one. I have — more than once. That being said, however, there are certain endings we should probably all try to avoid.

1. The "The End" ending.

The End

This not a real ending, merely the announcement of one. It's fine for children's stories where your audience might be too young to realize that you're done, but for mature readers it's a let down.

2. The "I hope you liked my story" ending.

Well, that's all I have to say. I hope you liked my story!

If I did like the story, this ending would quickly help to change my opinion of it. And if I didn't like it, I doubt I'll like it any better just because the writer hopes I will.

3. The "Tell 'em what ya told 'em" ending.

In this paper, I have just discussed blah, blah, blah...

I don't know who started this but I sure wish they'd stop. Somewhere, a long time ago, somebody started telling kids that their papers should look like this: (Introduction) "Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em." (Body) "Tell 'em." (Conclusion) "Tell 'em what ya told 'em." Now, by my count that means you have to write everything three times and your poor reader has to read everything three times. This seems excessive if not pointless. If you've already told me something, and if I'm any kind of a reader at all, I certainly don't want to hear about it again, let alone two more times.

4. The "It was only a dream" ending.

I was just about to... when I woke up. It was only a dream.

I know it's tempting to use this ending when you're writing a really long story that you don't know how to finish. But readers usually hate it when stories end this way.

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Tips for Good Endings

Start slow and build. The first endings that we usually write are a single sentence long. That's about all we can do to begin with and that's fine. It's enough just to get the feeling of an ending when you're starting out. After you're comfortable with one-sentence endings, try a one-paragraph ending. This is not as hard as it seems: you just take your one-sentence ending and add a few details to it. Most of the time, when you're writing for school, you should be writing fairly short pieces (500 words or less). In this case, a one-paragraph ending is really all you need. When you're working with longer pieces, your ending can become an entire section unto itself. This means that several paragraphs may be involved.

In general, kids' endings are too short. Because endings are so hard, most kids don't like to write them. And because most kids don't like to write them, they tend to write them too short. Whenever I read an ending that is too short, I feel like the writer couldn't wait to get finished. I can almost sense the discomfort of a kid struggling to eek out a sentence where a full paragraph would be better. It's as though I can feel the writer's anxiety and discomfort, and this makes me feel uncomfortable, too.

Write your ending before you get there. One thing I do often is write my ending ahead of time. I'll get into my piece, maybe a third of the way through, just enough to understand my topic, then I'll think about where I'm going to go with it, and then I'll just stop and write the ending. I try to figure out what I want my readers to think and/or do when they finish reading and I just write that down. Even if it's not perfect — and it usually isn't — I still have something I can work with. Then I go back and write from wherever I was and head toward my new ending.

The ending is the last thing your audience will read. As we've talked about before, you have a lot of responsibility when it comes to ending your piece effectively. After all, the ending is the last thing your readers will read and that means they're quite likely to remember it better than other parts of your piece. But this means you have an opportunity, too. You can use your ending to say something very important with the knowledge that your readers will be listening closely to your every word. There are only two places where you can count on having your reader's full attention. One is at the beginning, the other is at the end.

Don't forget the "So what?" Try to always keep in mind that in order to read your writing, readers have to expend a certain amount of time and energy. They also have to give up things. Instead of reading your piece, for example, they could be watching Comedy Central, or downloading MP3 files, or day-trading on the stock market through their parents' brokerage account. Who knows what fun, excitement, and potential profit they have chosen to forego simply to read your writing. As such, they have a right to expect some return on their investment. Specifically, they have a right to ask, "So what? What does this piece have to do with me? Why should I care about it?" And that's exactly the question you need to answer in your ending.

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A Glossary of Happy Endings

1. Advice. (A) If you cannot swallow and your throat is puffy, then you have strep. You should get lots of rest. And get a shot because the shot will make you better faster than the medicine. **(B)** If you're thinking about going skydiving, take my advice: stop thinking.

2. Big feeling. (A) Oh Yeah! Here is some thing really funny. My hair still smells like smoke. I love campfires. **(B)** Finally the parade was done. We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had. **(C)** When it's time to go, none of us wants to leave. As I say my good-byes, I think of all the fun we had, and what fun we will have next time.

3. Remember. (A) Remember, even though the Mariners are losing doesn't mean they're a bad team. **(B)** So always remember to keep an extra key somewhere. You never know when you might need it.

4. Do. (A) There were 300 families with no homes because of the fire. They couldn't put out the fire because they had no sprinklers. I am mad because fires can kill people. Next time buy some sprinklers. **(B)** Down with the dolls! Get rid of every store that carries them! Let the revolution for a Barbie-free America begin! **(C)** If you care about the lives of your children and the quality of your community, then vote for tomorrow's school levy. It's the best way to guarantee a bright future for everyone. **(D)** Make a commitment to getting in shape today. Turn off the television, put down whatever it is you're reading (unless it's this essay, of course), start living a healthy life today. You'll be glad you did.

5. Future. (A) Last year was definitely the hardest, craziest year of my life. And I loved it! Things are going great. I never knew the incredible feeling of accomplishing things that in the past seemed impossible—not only with school, but with my entire life. Every day is another chance to do something great. And now I have the confidence and motivation to conquer anything that is put forth in front of me. I feel I owe this to many things and to many people, but most of all I owe it to myself. Now I think about the consequences of everything I do and say. And this helps me make better decisions, decisions that help me build a better future. The future! For the first time I'm looking forward to it. **(B)** Everybody's always talking about adults being good role models for kids, but maybe we should be models for them. Maybe we could teach them a few things about how to have a good time and enjoy life. It's worth a try. I'd hate to think that the way growing up seems to me now is the way it's going to be when I get there.

6. Lesson. (A) I learned that I shouldn't lie because it gets me into worse trouble. In the future I'm not going to lie. If I have a problem, I'm going to tell someone about it, and ask for help. **(B)** From the wars in Korea and Vietnam, our country learned painful but valuable lessons that will guide our foreign policy well into the next century and beyond.

7. Recommendation. (A) I recommend this book for readers who like adventures and interesting stories. **(B)** Even after all the bad things that happened, it was still a fun trip. If you go there, I can't guarantee you won't have all the problems we did. But I can recommend this vacation to any family who wants a real challenge. **(C)** Even though the food was pretty good and it wasn't too expensive, I'm afraid I can't recommend this restaurant to everyone. It was very noisy and the service was slow. I don't think it would be a good choice for families with small children.

8. Main idea. (A) Chores aren't the worst but they're definitely not the best! **(B)** An actor acts. A hero helps. The actor becomes famous and the hero does not. And that's just it: Heroes don't care about the credit, they just care.

9. Main idea and implications. (A) Henry Ford's revolutionary thinking affected the lives of many Americans. The Ford Motor Company became one of the largest industrial companies in the world, and a household name. Opportunity to be mobile in a Ford automobile gave the open road to the ordinary American. Businesses boomed in the hard times of the Depression because the auto gave the opportunity for work to many. The American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was more possible in the auto. Americans today still have a love affair with cars thanks to Henry Ford and his revolutionary thinking.

10. Effect. (A) While all this happened, another close neighbor had witnessed the incident and called 911. It was decided afterward that the dog had contracted rabies and he was soon put to sleep. I was given a series of shots and a few stitches only, and after a couple of years, my leg healed, but the scars remain on both the inside and out. **(B)** The internment of the Japanese Americans was one of the lowest points in United States history. We did it out of revenge and out of hate. The fear that we felt after the attack at Pearl Harbor was well founded, but the internment was not the way to overcome it. The internment hurt so many people so deeply and really accomplished nothing in the short run. In the long run, it brought nothing but shame upon us.

11. Question. (A) As this miracle season comes to a close, the one thing on every fan's mind is this: "Can they do it again next year? **(B)** Will the human race ever see the irony in destroying the planet that is their only home? How much more evidence do we need before we take global warming seriously? **(C)** I guess what still bothers me is how confused I am about what happened. If I was ever in that same situation again, would I act the same way, or would I do something different?

12. Sequel. (A) As soon as I walked in the dining room I smelled trouble. I looked down at my plate and saw what I smelled! Brussels sprouts! I gave a loud tragic moan and knew there was going to be another story written by Alex Carter. But for now, I would feed my Brussels sprouts to the fish. **(B)** And so ends another after school adventure, or misadventure, I should say. Stay tuned for the further misadventures of a kid with not enough homework to keep him out of trouble and way too many wild ideas.

13. Reflective evaluation. (A) So I guess that I lived happily ever after except that I couldn't walk for the rest of the trip. Maybe that camp ground wasn't so cool after all. **(B)** From that point on my life has been good. Except for the chores. I think my mom got the better end of the deal on that one. **(C)** BRRRIIINNNGGG! The bell rang! I pulled on my backpack, tore out of the room, sprinted down the stairs, sped down the hallway, and bounded out the door. I dashed home and grabbed a snack. I popped a video into the VCR, turned on the TV, and relaxed. Ahhhhhh! What a glorious day! **(D)** My whole world seems to be more on track now that she's gone. My self-confidence, my general attitude has improved immensely. I do miss her sometimes. How could I not after three years of friendship? All I can think is that I was a good friend to her. Our relationship didn't survive, but we'll always have the laughs… and the tears.

14. Wish, hope, dream. (A) Now, I'm looking at John, over the mess on the kitchen table, wondering if he's all right, because he's only eight years old, and that was a lot of throwing up to do. Then he gets to go out and play with his friend, just like he wanted. I feel a little cheated. Would I have gotten to go back out if that was me? I really wish he could have the experience of a younger sibling, just so he would know how I feel. **(B)** I hope someday that I can be a good parent just like my mom. But until then, I'll just work on being a good kid. **(C)** Even now, years later, I still dream of what my life might have been like. **(D)** I think that Jay Buhner is a true hero. The Seattle Mariners would be lacking an excellent right fielder without him. I hope he stays in Seattle for the rest of his baseball career.

15. Tribute. (A) I salute you, Lieutenant John Olson. May your bravery and courage be passed on so that someone else may look up to you and yours, and honor them as I do. **(B)** John was the best kid I ever knew. There when I need him, gone when he knew I needed to be alone. And I feel darn privileged of having the extreme honor of being his blood-brother. I just wish we could have carted him along when we moved here to Canby. God bless his soul. I'm never going to forget him.

16. Wrap-around. (A) Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car door slammed as we got out of the van. … We put the blanket in the trunk. Boom! It slammed again and we drove away as I thought how much fun I had.

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11

Little Things That Make a Big Difference

Often, it's the little things that get overlooked. We've concentrated so far on strategies that have an obvious impact on the quality of your writing. But now it's time to look at things that are a bit more subtle.

These are the kinds of things that don't often get much attention when we're learning to write in school. Perhaps everyone assumes that writers can figure out ways to deal with them on their own. While that's probably true, I don't think it hurts anyone to get a little extra help in the form of firendly advice.

Here are the topics we'll be covering in this chapter:

- **The Five Big Questions.** As its name implies, this is a set of five very important questions. They can be used to analyze and improve any piece of writing.
- **Sharing, conferencing, and feedback.** Talking about your own writing and the writing of others is a big part of learning to write. We'll consider some advice about how to do it well.
- **How do you know when you're finished?** It's not always easy to know when a piece is finished. This strategy gives you some help.
- **Beating writer's block.** All writers reach a point when they just don't know what to write next. We'll talk about what to do when you get there.

Sometimes writing comes down to a lot of little things and there's really no way to get around it. These issues will arise in one way or another with just about every piece you write. Learning to deal with them effectively will help you enjoy writing more and make you a more effective writer. Even though they look like little things, they add up to make a big difference in your work.

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The Five Big Questions

It happened because I was too tired to think of anything else. A few years ago, I went on a long road trip. I had workshops to give and teaching to do in many different schools spread out around the country. After the first week, I was tired. After the second week, I was completely exhausted. And I still had a week to go. During that last week, I didn't have the energy to come up with interesting writing lessons. So I just started asking students if they would share their writing and let me ask them questions about it. To my surprise, this worked out better than I would have ever imagined. With the help of several different classrooms, by the time the week was over, we had come up with a set of five questions that could be used to help writers improve any piece of writing they were working on. These became known as "The Five Big Questions."

(1) What makes this writing good? Just about every piece of writing has something good about it regardless of the shape it may be in at any given time. It's important to recognize the quality in a piece of writing even though it may not be perfect. Every time we see something good in a piece, we have an opportunity to learn about a new writing technique.

(2) What would make this writing better? Every piece, no matter how good it is, can probably be improved in some way. Sometimes we can see many improvements that need to be made. But we only want to focus on a few of them, those few improvements that will have the greatest impact on the piece as a whole.

(3) What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know? This is the main idea. It's important to be clear about what it is and to make sure that the details in the piece support it. The writer should be able to state the main idea as a complete sentence. Anything that doesn't support the main idea can possibly be removed. The main idea should be something that is important to both writer and reader.

(4) Why did you write this? This is the writer's purpose. Sometimes you feel like the only reason you're writing something is because someone else said you had to. But that's someone else's purpose, not yours. What do you want your audience to think about when they finish reading your piece? What, if anything, do you want them to do?

(5) What does your audience need to know? In order to understand a piece of writing, readers need to know certain things. As you look over your piece, ask yourself whether you have included everything your audience needs to know. Think also about things in your piece that your audience may not need to know. These parts might not need to be included at all. Sometimes you'll have to ask your audience about these things because it can be hard to figure out exactly what information other people need.

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The Five Big Questions

1 Quality...
What makes this writing good?

2 Improvement...
What would make this writing better?

3 Main Idea...
What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know?

4 Purpose...
Why did you write this?

5 Questions...
What does your audience need to know?

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Sharing Your Writing

Everyone has to share. In order for a writing classroom to work, everyone has to share. When you share, you're not only helping yourself, you're helping others, too. You're helping the other writers in the class by letting them hear your work so they can learn from the things you are doing well and see how you handle challenges. You're also helping your teacher, too. I know that I can't teach effectively if I don't know what students are working on. Often, my best lessons are based on something I hear when a writer shares.

Share regularly. You should probably share at least once or twice every time you take a piece through the writing process. You can share any time you want feedback but there are two perfect times to share that every writer should take advantage of: **(1)** It's great to get feedback just as you are finishing up your first draft. This will help you plan for revision. And, **(2)** Everyone should share after they feel they've finished revising their piece right before they move on to editing and publishing. This is your last chance to find out if your piece really works before you put in the time to make corrections and get it finished.

Be prepared. It's a good idea to read over what you plan to share just before you get up to share it. This will help you read more easily and be more efficient with the limited time you have.

If you have a long piece, just read one part. Many writers will want to share during a given class period. If someone gets up and reads a 20-page piece, that could take up all the time. In general, you'll have three or four minutes to share: a minute or two to read and another minute or two to get some feedback — at most. So if your piece is long, pick a page or two (200-300 words) and just share that.

Tell your audience what kind of feedback you want. Your audience will give you better feedback if they know what you're looking for. If you just tried a new beginning, tell them you want their reactions to that. If you just added some new material, make sure they understand what you were hoping to accomplish by adding it.

Feedback is not the truth. It's important to realize that what your audience says about your piece is not the truth, it's just the opinion of other writers. You can take it or leave it. All you have to think about is how you're going to make your piece better. If what others say makes sense to you, go ahead and use their advice. But if you have your own ideas, follow those instead.

Know what you're going to do next. The purpose of sharing is to get feedback so you know what you want to do to improve your piece. It's your responsibility to get the feedback you need and to decide what to do with it. When you finish sharing, it's up to you to figure out what you're going to do next, and then you need to start doing it.

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Conferencing with Your Teacher

Use conference time wisely. Conference time is your most valuable learning time. In a conference with your teacher, you get individualized help from someone who knows how to help you better than anyone else. This is valuable time, time when you can get exactly the help you need to improve a piece of writing. Your teacher may have only 2-3 minutes to spend with you. Don't waste a second of it.

Request a conference appropriately. Your teacher will have a procedure for requesting a conference. Some teachers use a sign up sheet or a list on the board. If you need a conference, but can't get one right when you want it, don't just sit there and wait, keep working, perhaps on a different part of your piece or on a different piece altogether.

Tell your teacher exactly what you want help with. Teachers don't know what students want to conference about and they don't have time to figure it out on their own. Start your conference by saying something like, "I need help with...." Be specific. Don't say something like "Can you fix my periods and capitals?" That's too general. Your teacher might have to sit at your desk correcting your work for the rest of the period! And that's not what she wants to do.

Be prepared. When you meet your teacher for a conference, have everything you need out in front of you. In addition to what you're working on at the moment, have all your pre-writing and previous drafts handy so your teacher can see them if necessary. If you need to read something to your teacher, practice it first so you can read it smoothly and efficiently.

Focus on one important problem. Your teacher only has time to help you with one thing in a conference, so pick something important. Use all the time you have to get exactly the help you need to solve a particular problem. If you want help with other things, fix this one first. Then request another conference at a later time.

Take your teacher's advice. No one knows more about helping you learn to write than your teacher. If you have a problem, your teacher will know how to fix it. But will you take your teacher's advice? I've been in many conferencing situations where the student simply wouldn't act on the suggestions I offered. This is frustrating for me because if the student won't take my advice, then there's no reason to have a conference in the first place. If a writer has requested my time for help with an individual problem, I'm assuming it's because he or she values my advice and wants to use it. If you tell me your problem and I come up with a suggestion that might solve it, I expect you to give it a try. It may not work. You and I may need to conference again to come up with another approach. But we won't know this until you try. If you don't understand my suggestion, let me know and we'll go over it until you do. When kids won't try, no matter how nicely I ask them, I feel as though I'm being taken advantage of. It makes me feel like they don't value my help or that they just want to waste my time.

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Giving Feedback to Other Writers

Never forget the purpose of feedback. The purpose of feedback is to help the writer improve the piece. It is not to make the writer feel good or bad. It is not just a chance for you to talk. Nor is it an opportunity for you to "take the stage" and show everyone else how smart you are. Before you give feedback to another writer, ask yourself: "How will my feedback help?"

Questions are most helpful. The best thing you can do for another writer when giving feedback is to ask questions. Getting questions from an audience is the most valuable information a writer can have because it lets the writer know what the audience wants to know. Writers can get pretty good at guessing what their audience needs, but there's no way to be sure. The best questions are those which help writers develop their pieces in significant ways. Questions that ask how something came about or why something is the way it is are almost always good. For example, "How did you get your dog?" and "Why do you like your dog so much?" are better questions than "What is your dog's name?"

Nix the "shoulds." It's always tempting to say something like "You should add more detail." or "You should fix your ending." But these kinds of comments don't help very much. If you feel yourself about to "should" someone, try turning your comment into a question: "I'd like to know more about...?" or "What did you want us to think about at the end?"

Be specific and constructive. In order for your feedback to be helpful, the writer has to be able to do something with it. If you say, "I liked your piece," that's certainly very nice, and I'm sure the writer will be happy to hear it, but there isn't anything the writer can do with that feedback to make his or her piece better. In a similar way, a comment like, "I didn't understand that last part," isn't tremendously helpful either. What was it exactly that you didn't understand? Can you come up with a specific question the writer can respond to? When giving feedback, especially when that feedback is negative, try to be specific about where you think the problem is and constructive about what the writer might be able to do about it: "I felt like the pacing was a little slow near the end. Are you sure you need that long second anecdote?"

Respect the writer's requests. If a writer comes up and asks for feedback on her beginning, don't tell her she needs to work on a different part of the piece. As you listen, think about what the writer has asked you to pay attention to and offer feedback appropriately.

Don't correct unless someone asks for it. When we hear someone make an obvious mistake, many of us immediately want to correct it. It's a natural reaction, but it's not a very helpful one. Nobody likes to be corrected unless they ask for it. If a writer hasn't asked to be corrected but you're just bursting to butt in, ask for permission first: "Can I offer you a correction that I think will help make your piece better?"

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Don't Correct

Correcting tends to shut people down and that's just the opposite of what we want to do when we're giving them feedback about how to improve their writing. However, there are many times during feedback when it's necessary to say something negative. How do you do that without correcting? Here are a few techniques you can use to have deep, meaningful discussions with writers without correcting their work.

(1) INSPECT the writing closely. Read the writing thoughtfully and thoroughly. Look it over patiently, don't rush. Even if you end up with something negative to say, the writer will at least know that you gave it appropriate consideration.

(2) DETECT those parts that work for you and those that don't. What parts do you like? What parts work better for you than others? Instead of speaking in terms of "right" and "wrong," tell the writer how something does or does not communicate effectively to you.

(3) REFLECT on why some parts work and others don't. Why do you like certain parts so much better than others? What is it about those parts that makes them more successful? How might less effective parts be improved? Remember, again, to be specific and constructive.

(4) CONNECT your reactions with the writer's message and intent. What is the writer's main idea? What is the writer's purpose? Who is the writer writing to? How does the writer think he or she is doing at getting the message across? Giving the writer a chance to speak and perhaps to clarify his or her goals can really improve the dialog.

(5) INJECT your own opinions. Be honest, say what you really think. But always be accountable; use the first person, own your reactions. Remember, this is just your opinion, it's not the truth. There's nothing wrong with offering negative opinions. The problem comes when we act as though we are right and that others have to agree with us or they are wrong.

(6) RESPECT the writer's reactions. Listen closely to what the writer has to say about your comments. Remember that the writer does not have to make the changes you suggest. The writer is always in charge of the feedback, not the other way around.

(7) PERFECT the communication between reader and writer. Do you really understand each other? Taking a minute to go back over what has been said.

(8) EXPECT to repeat the process. Within practical time limits, it's up to the writer to decide how long he or she wants the feedback process to continue. There need not be any agreement between writer and reader. But the parties should always strive to understand each other's positions and intent.

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How Long Does it Have to Be?

It's one of the oldest questions there is. Since teachers have been teaching writing, students have been asking, "How long does my piece have to be?" I know that when I was in school, my friends and I often asked this question. Our intention was to find out how much or how little work we would be expected to do. Usually we got a minimum word count or a number of pages we needed to fill. And then we set about filling them, often with less concern for quality than for length. And that's the problem: when someone tells you to write at least 500 words or at least five pages, part of the message you're getting is that the number of words is more important than what those words say. And this is not at all the message your teachers would like you to get.

Think function not form. When you set out to write a piece of a certain minimum length, you're thinking about what it will look like in its final form: a pile of paper so many pages high with so many words, sentences, or paragraphs. What you're not thinking about is how that pile of paper should function as a piece of written communication. Specifically, you're not thinking about what all those words, sentences, and paragraphs should accomplish in the mind of a reader. In writing, as in many things, form should follow function, not the other way around.

Beginning, middle, end, yadda, yadda, yadda. Since kindergarten you've probably been hearing people say that a piece of writing has to have a beginning, middle, and end. This is true. But once again, it speaks only to the form of a piece, what it should look like. It doesn't say anything at all about what each of these three parts should accomplish and how you might go about accomplishing it. As such, it's pretty useless information.

What is the beginning supposed to do? The beginning of a piece must catch the reader's attention. It has to pull the reader in and pique his curiosity, it has to make the reader want to read more. Of course, the reader has to have at least some inkling of what he's reading about, so it also has to introduce the topic in a successful way as well. Look at the "Glossary of Good Beginnings" to get ideas for how to do this.

What is the middle supposed to do? The middle of a piece must deliver on the promise of the beginning. It must clearly convey the writer's main idea with ample but not excessive supporting details, and it must also answer all of the reader's important questions. Strategies like What-Why-How, Transition-Action-Details, and Content-Purpose-Audience are best for this.

What is the end supposed to do? The ending has to make the piece feel finished and leave the reader with something important to think about. It also has to make the reader feel that the time and energy he devoted to reading your piece was worthwhile. For ideas about coming up with effective endings see the "Glossary of Happy Endings."

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Am I Finished Yet?

After reading the BEGINNING...

___ Will my readers have a hint as to what my paper is about?

___ Will my readers think my piece is going to be worth reading?

___ Will my readers want to find out more?

After reading the MIDDLE...

___ Will my readers think I included enough details to help them understand my main idea?

___ Will my readers have enough information so they don't have any important questions?

___ Will my readers think I included just the right amount of information?

After reading the END...

___ Will my readers feel that my piece is finished?

___ Will my readers feel that my ending gave them something important to think about?

___ Will my readers feel that their time was well spent?

How LONG should my piece be?

Your piece should be long enough to express your ideas in such a way that you've communicated your message effectively and all your reader's important questions are answered — and not one word longer!

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Beating Writer's Block

It happens to every writer sooner or later. You get started on a piece and all of a sudden it seems like you have no idea what to write next. And this feeling of being stuck doesn't go away in just a few seconds. In fact, it feels so permanent that if someone paid you $100 you couldn't write another sentence. This is writer's block and as far as I know, no teacher has ever paid a kid to beat it. You have to beat it on your own. Fortunately, there are several things you can do to get yourself out of this most uncomfortable situation.

(1) Reread your piece from the beginning. Sometimes you just need a little kickstart to get yourself going again. Gather up your pages and read your piece through all the way from the beginning. You may be surprised to find that when you make it back up to where you were stuck, you know exactly how to continue.

(2) Look over your pre-writing. Get out the pre-writing you did for this piece and look it over. Chances are you'll find something there you haven't written about yet.

(3) Do some more pre-writing. If you can't write, pre-write. With so many different strategies, you could probably pre-write for days. This is not exactly what you want to do, but a few minutes of pre-writing could help get you unstuck by giving you something new to start writing about.

(4) Work on a different part of the piece. One of my best writer's block strategies is to give up for a while at the point where I'm stuck and start in on a different part of the same piece. If you're stuck on the first sentence, this probably won't work for you, but assuming you've made it past the lead, it's a fine idea.

(5) Do some formatting, some editing, or some recopying. Another one of my tricks is to actually stop writing but to keep working on the same piece in different ways. If I'm working on a computer, I'll take a few minutes and do some formatting. Even if I'm not on a computer, I can still do some editing here and there. Sometimes, because my handwriting is pretty bad, I'll recopy some parts onto new pages so I can read them more easily.

(6) Share. The best way to figure out what to right next is to have someone else figure it out for you. Share your writing with the class. Tell everyone that you're stuck and don't know what to write next. After you've read, see what ideas your audience comes up with.

(7) Work on another piece. When all else fails, you can always put your current piece away and work on a different piece. Sometimes writers get so stuck, or just so tired of a piece, that they really do need to put it down for a while. Start a new piece, or pick up an old one, it doesn't matter. Come back to your current piece when you figure out what you want to do with it.

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The Writing Strategy Organizer

1 Pick a topic…

Topic T-Charts

Like	Hate
Pizza Baseball My dog Cars Recess Disneyland David Letterman Money Fishing Paintball Staying up late	Homework Cleaning my room All vegetables Math Spelling tests Rainy days Scary things Being bored Getting dressed up

Like/Hate
Things you like and things you hate.

Typical/Unusual
Typical life experiences and unusual life experiences.

Fun/Have To
Things you do for fun and things you do because you have to do them.

Change/Stay the Same
Things you want to change and things you want to stay the same.

Regret/Proud Of
Things you regret and things you are proud of.

2 Develop an idea…

What-Why-How

What	Why	How
My dog is the most amazing animal in the whole wide world.	He protects me.	Whenever someone comes to the door he barks to let me know.
	He plays with me.	At the park we play frisbee. He catches it in his mouth and brings it back.
	He does my homework for me.	He's great with math. He has a little trouble holding the pencil, though.
	He makes money for me.	We were on David Letterman's "Stupid Pet Tricks." Disney just called about a movie deal.

What do you think?
This is your opinion.

Why do you think it?
These are the reasons that support your opinion.

How do you know?
These are the examples, evidence, descriptions, or reference citations that prove your opinion.

3 Add detail…

Idea-Details

Idea	Details
At the park we play frisbee. He catches it in his mouth and brings it back.	He runs as fast as he can. He jumps up in the air. He almost never misses. People can't believe how good he is. He can jump about 5 feet high. He'll only catch it if I throw it.

Make a Paragraph

With just a few changes, the idea and supporting details can easily be combined into a paragraph:

> "Sometimes, my dog and I go up to the park to play frisbee. As soon as I throw it, he runs as fast as he can to catch it. He jumps high in the air and catches it in his teeth. He can jump about five feet high. People can't believe how good he is because he almost never misses. But he'll only catch it if I throw it."

Not every detail needs to be used. Often, writers will change things around a bit as they go along.

4 Add "showing" detail…

Tell-Show

Tell	Show
He runs as fast as he can. He jumps in the air.	As I take out the frisbee, he starts to wag his tail. As soon as I let it fly, he tears after it as fast as he can. Just when I think he's not going to get it, he leaps into the air, stretches out his neck, and snags it between his teeth like a wild animal capturing his prey.

How Do You Do This?

Learning to create great "showing" details takes a lot of practice. Fortunately, practicing is easy and fun. The best way to get started is to visualize a scene before you start to write. Try this:

- Think about your "telling" detail(s).
- Close your eyes and make a picture in your mind.
- Make a mental list of everything you "see" in the "picture."
- Now, in your writing, describe the scene that you've created in your mind.

5 Develop a narrative…

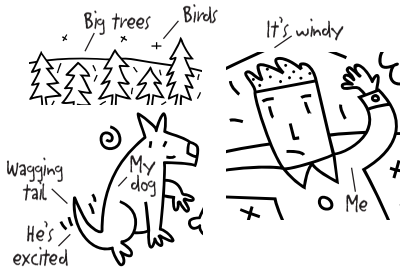
Transition-Action-Details

Transition	Action	Details
About a month ago…	My dog and I went to Andrews Park to play frisbee.	• The wind was really blowing. • There was hardly anyone at the park.
I ran him around for a while, and then…	I took out the frisbee and threw it hard and it took off over the trees.	• I tried to stop my dog from going after it, but it was too late. • He ran off. I couldn't see him anymore.
	The frisbee went over the trees and down a steep hill.	• There was some construction on the other side, and I was worried my dog might get hurt.
A few minutes later,…	My dog came running back with the frisbee.	• He was all dirty. It looked like he'd been in the mud. • He had a cut on his ear.

Fill out the ACTION column first, the DETAILS column next, and the TRANSITION column last. Try to keep the number of ACTIONs between 3 and 7. Each row of the chart can be a separate paragraph. Or, several rows can be combined together. It depends on how many DETAILS you have. Not every row needs a TRANSITION.

6 Capture a scene…

Draw-Label-Caption



I'm playing frisbee with my dog at Andrews Park.

A Few Things to Think About

- This is just a rough sketch, not a finished illustration.
- Label everything you can think of.
- In your caption, write down anything you think is important.
- Each thing you identify in the picture is a detail you can use when you start to write.
- Spending time on the picture makes you more familiar with the scene and helps you think of things to write about.

7 Create a strong beginning…

Action-Feelings-Setting

Action	Feelings	Setting
I've just thrown the frisbee, and my dog is starting to go after it.	WHAT: I'm excited but also a little scared. WHY: I threw it too far and he's going to run off into the trees where he might get hurt.	We're up at Andrews Park. It's really windy and cold. There aren't many people around.

"It was cold and windy that day at Andrews Park, and there weren't very many people around. I threw the frisbee hard into the wind and it just took off like I'd never seen before. Immediately, my dog started chasing after it. And as I saw it sail off over the trees and toward a big construction site, I started to get worried."

8 Plan an entire piece…

Content-Purpose-Audience

Main Idea	Key Details
What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know?	What details will help your audience "unlock" your main idea?
Think	**Do**
What do you want your readers to think about after they're finished?	What do you want your readers to do after they're finished?
People	**Questions**
Who are you writing to?	What does your audience want to know about your topic?

Content
The main idea plus key supporting details.

Purpose
What you want your readers to thnk and/or do.

Audience
The people you are writing to and the important questions they have about your topic.

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The Writing Strategy Organizer

9 Improve focus and develop a main idea…

Main Idea

What is your main idea?
What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know?

It's like this…
Imagine taking an entire piece and scrunching it down into a single sentence that still said more or less the same thing. That's kind of what a main idea is. Most pieces,are built on a single thought. That thought is the main idea and everything else in the piece is there to help the audience understand it. The simplest way to think about the main idea of a piece is to think of it as the one most important thing you want the audience to know. If you had to write just one sentence to represent everything you wanted to say, that would be the main idea.

Is your main idea:

___ A complete thought; a complete sentence?
___ Something that is important to you?
___ Something that is important to the audience?

(A good main idea has all three of these qualities.)

Something to think about.
The main idea is probably the most important thing about a piece of writing. If you make sure you have a good main idea, and that the details in your piece support it, you're almost guaranteed to have a successful piece.

10 Find details…

Where Do Details Come From?

"A detail is the answer to a question a reader might have."

5Ws+H

Who? • What? • When?
Where? • **Why?** • **How?**

Spend more time answering the "Why" and "How" questions. The answers almost always produce the most interesting details.

5 Senses

See? • Hear? • Touch?
Smell? • Taste?

Spend most of your time thinking about what you want readers to "see." Make use of the other senses only rarely.

Action

First,…
Then,…
Next,… etc…

For more details, break the action down into smaller "events." Plan out the sequence of events using Transition-Action-Details.

Feelings

Every "who" in your piece has feelings. YOUR feelings will usually be the most important. Strong feelings make for a strong piece.

Attributes

Every person, place, or thing in your story has attributes: shape, size, color, anything you can think of to describe anything in your piece.

Setting

Every setting can be described in great detail. Readers like it when the writer "sets" the scene. Don't forget to include a back story detail.

11 Write great fiction...

The 5 Facts of Fiction

❶ **Fiction is all about character.** Who is the main character? Can you describe his or her personaly? How did your character get to be this way? The more you know about your characters (especially about why they do the things they do), the better your story will be.

❷ **Fiction is all about what your character wants.** What one thing does your character want more than anything esle in the world? Why does your character want it? The more important something is to someone, the more he or she will do to get it.

❸ **Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.** Is your character successful? Or does your character's quest end in failure? What obstacles does you characterter encounter?

❹ **Fiction is all about how your character changes.** How does your character change as a result of what happens? How is your character at the beginning? At the end? What does your character learn?

❺ **Fiction is all about a world that you create.** What kinds of people, places, and things does the world of this story contain? What successes, disasters, and conflicts arise in this world? Complete this sentence: "This is a world where…".

❶ Main character ❷ Motivation ❸ Plot ❹ Main idea ❺ Setting

12 Write a good lead…

What Makes a Good Lead?

What's the best way to start a piece of writing? No one really knows. Each piece of writing is different because writers have different ways of introducing themselves to their readers. Every writer must consider his or her audience, and try to decide what few words will be most likely to keep the reader reading. In general, good leads:

Get right to the point. There's no rule about how short a lead needs to be. In most cases, however, the lead is contained in the first one or two sentences. Remember, you don't have much time to hook your reader.

Have immediate impact. Some leads are funny, some are surprising, some are just plain weird. But good leads make the reader feel some emotion right away.

Hint at the topic. You don't want to give away your whole idea, you want to save some of the best stuff for later. But you have to give the reader something.

Promise the reader a good experience. A reader has to make a big investment of time to read your writing. What would make someone want to spend an afternoon reading your work instead of doing something else?

Make the reader want to read on. If a lead doesn't make the reader want to continue reading, then what comes after the lead will never get read.

13 Draft effectively…

Diligent Drafting

Write on every other line.
Skip a line between lines. It's so much easier to make changes during revision when you have all that space to write between lines. And besides, it'll make you feel like you're getting twice as many pages written.

Number, date, and save everything.
With all those pages, you'll need to keep them in order. You should also put the date on each page. When you go back over previous drafts those dates could make the difference between being finished and being confused. And save everything you write—at least for a while.

Write on one side of the paper only.
This makes it easier to keep track of pieces that span many pages. It also allows you to cut your writing into pieces if you need to move things around.

If you get stuck…
Every writer gets writer's block. Here are four smart things you can do about it:

- Go back to your pre-writing and look for new material. Or, do some new pre-writing.
- Share your writing and ask your audience if they have any questions or any thoughts about what you could write next.
- Read your piece from the beginning. New ideas often occur to writers when they read over their entire piece.
- Put the piece aside and work on another piece for a while.

14 Know when you're finished…

When Are You Finished?

After reading the beginning…

___ Will my readers know what my paper is about?
___ Will my readers think my piece is going to be fun to read?
___ Will my readers want to find out more?

After reading the middle…

___ Will my readers think I included enough details to help them understand my main idea?
___ Will my readers have enough information so that they don't have a lot of questions?
___ Will my readers think I included just the right amount of information?

After reading the ending…

___ Will my readers understand the one most important thing I wanted them to know?
___ Will my piece feel finished and give my readers something to think about?
___ Will my readers feel that they had fun or that they learned something new?

How long should my piece be?
Your piece should be long enough to express your ideas in such a way that all your reader's questions are answered—and not one word longer!

15 Make sure you have a good idea…

Do You Have a Good Idea?

Is your idea…

___ **Something you have strong feelings about?** What are those feelings? How will you communicate those feelings to your reader? Is there a key moment or a particularly important detail you want to emphasize so your reader will understand exactly how you feel?

___ **Something you know a lot about?** What are the main things you want to cover? What's the most important part of your piece? What's the one thing you want your audience to know about your topic?

___ **Something you can describe in great detail?** What are some of the details of your topic? Why are these details important? How do these details help the reader understand your message?

___ **Something your audience will be interested in?** Who is your audience? Why will they be interested in your topic? What will interest them most?

___ **Something your audience will feel was worth reading?** What will your audience get from reading your piece? Will your audience learn something new? What will make your audience want to follow your piece all the way to the end?

16 Write a good ending…

What Makes a Good Ending?

Endings are tough, no doubt about it. And what seems like a good ending to some people can be a real let-down for others. And yet, endings are important. After all, the ending is the last thing your audience will read, so it'll probably be something they'll remember. Here are some ideas for things you can try:

Your main idea. One way to make sure you audience doesn't miss your message is to put it right at the end.

How the piece might affect the reader's life. This kind of ending can help you get the reader's attention.

A recommendation or some advice. Everyone loves good advice. Of course, everyone hates bad advice. And some people don't like getting any advice at all. But I still think this is a great way to end a piece.

Your purpose. Telling the reader why you took the trouble to write it might help them feel good about why they took the trouble to read it.

How you feel about the piece. Sometimes, a thoughtful reflection makes the perfect ending.

Thanks to Mrs. Goffe's 3rd graders at Sunrise Elementary School for giving me these great ideas about endings.

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Topic T-Chart #1

Perfect topics every time!

Like	Hate
Pizza	Homework
Baseball	Vegetables
Cats	Rainy Days
Writing	Chores
Movies	Being Sick

Typical-Unusual

Typical life experiences and unusual life experiences.

Fun-Have To

Things you do for fun and things you do because you have to.

Regret-Proud Of

Things you regret and things you're proud of.

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What-Why-How #2

Great support for your opinions!

What (Opinion)	Why (Reasons)	How (Evidence)
My dog is the most amazing pet in the whole world.	He does my algebra homework for me.	He's great in math but sometimes he needs help holding the pencil.
	He's helping me pay my way to college.	He just signed a deal with CNN for his own talk show: "A Dog's Eye View."

What do you think?

This is your opinion. Make a it a complete sentence.

Why do you think it?

These are the reasons for your opinion. Have at least 4 of 5.

How do you know?

These are your pieces of evidence, your examples, your proof.

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Idea-Details #3

Add details to your writing instantly!

Idea	Details
At the park we play frisbee. He catches it in his mouth and brings it back.	He runs really fast. He jumps up in the air. He never misses. People can't believe how good he is. He can jump about five feet high. He'll only catch it if I throw it.

Make a Paragraph

"Sometimes, my dog and I go up to the park to play frisbee. As soon as I throw it, he runs as fast as he can to catch it. He jumps high in the air and catches it in his teeth. He can jump about five feet high. People can't believe how good he is because he almost never misses. But he'll only catch it if I throw it."

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Tell-Show #4

Add descriptive detail to your writing!

Tell	Show
My dog runs as fast as he can and jumps in the air.	As I take out the frisbee, he starts to wag his tail. As soon as I let it fly, he tears after it as fast as he can. Just when I think he's not going to get it, he leaps into the air, stretches out his neck, and snags it between his teeth like an animal capturing its prey.

Think about your **telling** details.

Focus and concentrate on this one image.

Picture the scene in your **mind.**

Notice the attributes of each thing you see.

Describe what you **see** in the **picture.**

Treat each thing like a character in the story.

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Transition-Action-Details #5

Put anything into a logical sequence.

Transition	Action	Details
About a month ago,	My dog and I went to Andrews Park to play frisbee.	The wind was really blowing.
I ran him around for a while, and then	I took out the frisbee, threw it hard, and it took off over the trees.	I tried to stop my dog from going after it, but it was too late.
	The frisbee went over the trees and down a steep hill.	I was worried my dog might get hurt.
A few minutes later,	My dog came running back with the frisbee.	He was really dirty. It looked like he'd been in the mud.

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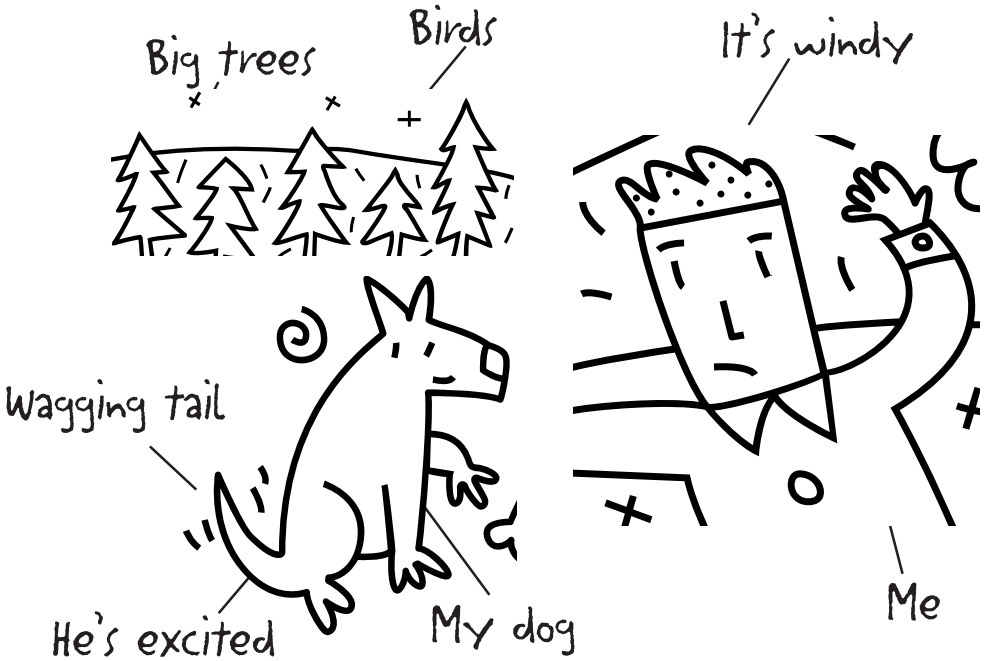
Draw-Label-Caption

#6

Capture a scene with many details!



I'm playing frisbee with my dog at Andrews Park.

This is a **sketch, not finished** artwork.

Work quickly. Include as many details as you can.

Label everything you can think of.

Use a single word or a short phrase. Identify everything.

Each **label** is a **detail** you can write about.

The more details you have, the better your piece will be.

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Action-Feelings-Setting #7

Create an effective description of any scene!

Action: I've just thrown the frisbee, and my dog is chasing after it.

Feelings: I'm excited but also scared. He's going to run off into the trees where he might get hurt.

Setting: We're up at Andrews Park. It's really windy and cold. There aren't many people around.

"It was cold and windy that day at Andrews Park, and there weren't very many people around. I threw the frisbee hard into the wind and it just took off like I'd never seen before. Immediately, my dog started chasing after it. And as I saw it sail off over the trees, I started to get worried that he might get hurt if he tried to catch it."

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Content-Purpose-Audience #8

One strategy for all kinds of writing!

Main Idea What's the one most important thing you want you audience to know?	**Key Details** What does your audience need to know to understand your main idea?
Think What do you want your audience to think after they're finished?	**Do** What do you want your audience to do after they're finished?
People What specific person or group of people are you writing this for?	**Questions** What does your audience want to know about your topic?

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